

This essay is offered in memory of Father Richard John Neuhaus and Rabbi Leon Klenicki.

THE WORLD IS THE AGENDA:
Jewish and Christian Perspectives on *Tikkun Olam*

The title of this essay indicates the theme I shall be discussing. It also embodies my basic thesis: in both the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the *world* is the agenda—God’s agenda and, therefore, also the agenda of those who count themselves among the people of God and members of the covenant. It has often been said that Christians and Jews are partners in hope. That hope is based on a *worldly* eschatology.

In other contexts (see my book *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, p. 31f. and postings X and XIII at www.isaacrottenberg.com), I have criticized claims by certain Jewish authors that Christianity is essentially an otherworldly religion and, as such, totally separate from Judaism. In a 1975 article, Rabbi Henry Siegman posited the incompatibility between Sinai and Golgotha as “the ultimate incommensurability of Judaism and Christianity” (*Worldview*, December 1975). Gershon Mamlok placed Christianity “within the syncretistic orbit of Hellas” (*Midstream*, December 1982), and Hyam Maccoby declared that “Pauline Gnosticism” and Christianity’s embrace of “a dualistic religious mystery-cult” caused the break between Judaism and Christianity (*Commentary*, August 1984). More recently, Menachem Kellner has argued that the Apostle Paul “never connects the faith that makes for righteousness and that leads to salvation to fulfillment of divine commandments” (*Christianity in Jewish Terms*, p. 271), thus in effect adding the charge of antinomianism to that of Gnosticism. All such claims, in one way or another, seek to suggest that Christianity preaches a form of world escape and, as distinct from Judaism, is irrelevant in the public realm.

Are there differences between the Jewish and Christian approaches to the world? Indeed, there are! And those must be dealt with in an open and honest dialogue. The more pertinent question to ask, however, is this: what *kind* of differences are we talking about? Do they, as some authors suggest, add up to a dichotomy or are they more a matter of nuance? When dealing with Christian and Jewish approaches to the world, I would opt for the term “nuance” while keeping in mind that accent and nuance in theology can go a long way in determining context and content.

Key differences between Jews and Christians are rooted in questions about the Law and issues concerning righteousness. “Christianity,” writes Darrell Jodock, is a Messiah-oriented religion to a degree that Judaism [with its expectation of a messianic age] is not...For Jews Torah is central...For Christians, Christ is central” (*Covenantal Conversations*, p.17). I think that it would be more accurate to say that Christianity is Christ-centered and – like Judaism – Kingdom of God oriented. Furthermore, the Christ who is at the center is the One who has fulfilled the Law that embodies divine righteousness and, as such, is the law of the Kingdom. Dealing with the dialectics of law and gospel has never been easy—not for Christians, and certainly not for Jews.

The “New Testament” message about the cross of Christ has its roots in the Mosaic Law. There we learn about the foundation, the *raison d’être* of the messianic mission. At issue is nothing less than the righteousness of the Holy One of Israel which must be established upon the earth. The high drama of the human search for at-onement with the Source of life is played out in the Temple cult of sacrifice. Jesus accomplished what he was sent to do: fulfill in an act of sacrificial and holy love *all righteousness* as embodied in God’s Law (Matthew 3:15). Seen in that light, Sinai and Golgotha have become part of a continuing story of redemption.

According to Rabbi Irving Greenberg, who considers Judaism and Christianity both “covenants of redemption,” one difference between the two religions can be stated thus: “[W]hereas Jewish tradition affirms that the final goals [of restoring Paradise] can be achieved under the leadership of a human avant-garde, Christianity adds the claim that God became the human model that leads humans into the final state” (*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, p.166. Also, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, p.141ff.). For Christianity, that “addition” is the heart of the matter. It is considered unnecessary for Judaism as an already fully comprehensive “system” of redemption in its own right. We need not be dealing with polar opposites, but rather with fundamental differences that have a common underlying vision of the divine plan for the world—a world in which we as Jews and Christians are called to be partners with God in the redemptive movement toward universal *Shalom*.

For many Jews today, the concept of *tikkun olam* expresses what a Jewish view of and approach to the world should be about. The term is usually translated as mending, repairing, or healing the world. But such words as “fixing” and “perfecting” are often used as well.

Some authors refer to *tikkun olam* as a central Jewish concept and a normative Jewish value. In short, it goes to the heart of the faith. This is sometimes stated with an air of self-evidence that might give the impression that there is a virtual Jewish consensus on the matter: It is all about peace and justice-- and who could be against that?

In the final paragraph of his book *The Jewish Approach to the World (Tikkun Olam)*, Rabbi Elliot Dorff sums things up as follows: “Our ultimate goal in *tikkun olam*, then, is a world at peace. This...does not mean just cessation of hostilities. It means also a world in which we have the blessings of children, a Jewish state in the land of Israel to which Jewish exiles can and do come to live, prosperity, health, procedural and substantive justice, recognition of Israel’s God and of Torah values as authoritative, and peace. May we all work toward these ends in our lives, not only for the sense of meaning and purpose that such efforts give us but also for the good we thereby do in the world. And, with God’s help, may we succeed” (p. 196).

In a general way, one can find a good deal of agreement on the meaning of *tikkun olam*. When it comes to discussing particulars, however, controversy is bound to ensue. In an article entitled “Repairing Tikkun Olam,” the late Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf wrote that “this strange and half-understood notion became a huge umbrella under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain” (see Jill Jacobs’s article, “The History of Tikkun Olam,” at www.zeek.net). In short, in every particular context the concept needs to be defined carefully. What does a given author have in mind when presenting *tikkun olam* as central to Jewish faith and practice? Furthermore, for the purpose of our present discussion, the question also arises whether the concept fits into a Christian theological framework; and if so, how?

A very early (3rd century) reference to *tikkun olam* is found in the *aleinu* prayer—a prayer of praise and gratitude that extols God’s greatness and goodness, and that for centuries has been recited as the closing prayer of the three daily services.

“It is our duty,” we read in the opening line, “to praise the Master of all” who is the God of Israel—a covenant God who dwells among his people and calls them to faithful service. This God is proclaimed as the sovereign Ruler in whose power rests the destiny of nations. The Holy One is in our midst when the Eternal One enters our time (Hosea 11:9).

The God of Israel is the God of the future who is ever present. His Kingdom is coming, and in that expectation a hope is born that can radically transform human behavior. This message of the Kingdom of God, with all its cosmic overtones, has historical-eschatological implications. There is a direct correlation between the here-and-now and the world- to- come. The future beckons while hope drives the soul, motivating believers to action. This is a dynamic of faith that Judaism and Christianity hold in common.

The *aleinu* prayer, cast in language that is charged with vision, poetry, and passion puts the emphasis primarily but not exclusively on the divine initiative in the history of redemption. The spontaneous response of God's people is to burst forth in joyful praise and thanksgiving. A similar sentiment is found in some Christian confessional/liturgical documents. Consider, for instance, the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever." Prayerful devotion is the breeding ground of a believer's ideals and good deeds.

When we move from the *aleinu* prayer to the 1950s, and especially the 1970s when the concept of *tikkun olam* re-emerged with force in Jewish writings, the tone tends to lose its eschatological and God-glorifying edge. By the end of the century, the term had essentially become synonymous with social action—a usage that, according to Richard Sarason, "has virtually no support in traditional rabbinic parlance" (*Covenantal Conversations*, p. 127).

In 1999, the Reform movement issued a platform that stated the following: "Partners with God in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom, and justice to our world...In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice."

Making this a better world, according to Rabbi Dorff, "is the essence of what it means to be a Jew." To many Christian ears, that will probably sound like a surprisingly optimistic view of life—particularly in light of the Shoah, and especially when such terms as *perfecting* the world are used. What trust in human nature! The "core vision document" of the TIKKUN community under the leadership of Rabbi Michael Lerner proudly proclaims their "unashamedly utopian" stance.

Christian reservations or even fears about such dreams are, of course, rooted in a more radical view of the nature of sin, as well as historical experiences with utopian schemes that have turned into nightmares. Still, there is broad agreement that something has gone awfully awry with God's good creation. We are dealing with a "fallen" world, a world injured by a near catastrophic rupture—a Lost Paradise. That world needs mending or, as I prefer, it needs *redeeming*. The consummation of world redemption will bring forth the Kingdom of God—a recreated world, a new heaven and a new earth; but, how do we get there?

Both Judaism and Christianity think in terms of a divine-human dynamic. Where the accent should fall in that dialectic has often been a point of theological disputes not only between Christians and Jews, but also within those two communities.

Through the gift of Torah and (for Christians) the gift of Jesus' messianic ministry, God's people are invited to become covenant partners in the divine drama of historical transformation. We share in the *missio Dei*. In that context, acts of righteousness, justice and peace are an essential part of the devotional life.

Among Jews, it seems to me, there is a tendency to let the accent fall on the human role in "building" the Kingdom of God. In Christian theology, on the other hand, the emphasis is more often placed on the breakthroughs of God's future into our time. The "New Testament," mindful of the not-yet aspect of our historical existence, speaks with proper eschatological reservation about "signs of the Kingdom." These are not empty symbols, but signs charged with the healing power of God's Spirit—empowered pointers to the promised future. The God of the Bible is doing new things all the time (Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5) and, *in response*, God's people are called to be a transformative force in history.

The "New Testament" portrays Abraham as the father of believers. That picture, in my view, is not one of an indomitable idealist. He has heard a voice "from beyond"; has received a summons to go; and ventures forth into an uncertain future, yet betting his life on God's promises. Martin Buber called him a "nomad of faith" and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called people like Abraham "pilgrims of the future."

"Justice, and only justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). Justice is not just a question of how I treat my neighbor, but above all a matter of how society and its laws are structured. If the early Christians had confined themselves to confessing Jesus as Lord of the human heart and Savior of the soul, the Roman authorities would have considered them harmless visionaries not worth persecuting. Both Torah and the Christian *kerygma* (Jesus is Lord and he alone!) are inherently political in nature; and one might say that politics is a noble – even holy – calling.

As noted before, during the 1960s and 1970s *tikkun olam* became virtually synonymous with social action while social action became strongly identified with various current political causes. "In college," writes Jill Jacobs, "I met self-identified secular Jews, for whom Judaism equaled *tikkun olam*, which equaled radical politics."

Similar developments occurred in the Christian theological world, where in many cases the focus shifted from theologies of hope to theologies of revolution and liberation; from the *Civitas Dei* to *The Secular City* (Harvey Cox, 1965); and from the realm of transcendence to the terrestrial realities. Again, these are not necessarily either/or positions. Rather they can and should exist in a dialectical tension that is constantly in search of a precarious balance. The struggle between a this-worldly horizontalism and an other-worldly heavenly hope has a long history in religious traditions.

In 1968, the World Council of Churches held its Uppsala meeting in Sweden where the slogan "Let the world set the agenda" gained great prominence. There is a huge

difference between that motto and our thesis that “the world is the agenda.” In the latter case, we are talking about a divine historical-eschatological initiative inviting a human response. It is about transformation and re-creation. In the former case, we are talking about being sensitive to our social-economic and cultural environment. Even when well-meant, letting the world set the agenda often turns out in practice to be a way of accommodating to all sorts of contemporary fads. Hot activism replaces Torah study and theological reflection—all in the name of a “prophetic” witness.

The “world” is a richly complex and ambiguous reality; and when theologizing about it, we should watch our language. There are so many different “worlds” with so many different value systems that seek to occupy our hearts and minds. Karl Barth’s often cited advice that preachers prepare their sermons with the Bible in one hand and the daily paper in the other surely has merit; but he of all people was never confused about where the ultimate source of authority was to be found, and neither should we.

In 1976, Richard John Neuhaus and Peter Berger edited a book entitled *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion*. The people involved in that project were concerned about what they felt was a loss of the transcendent dimension in much theological discourse of that day. As a result, they feared a relentless politicization of all things when, in Neuhaus’s words, “[t]he basic biblical beliefs and paradigms that ought to provide a measure of unity are captured for narrowly partisan political purposes” (*Believing Today: Jew & Christian in Conversation*, p. 74). The issue then is not whether God’s people should be for the world, but *how* they should go about it.

All prescriptions about religious involvement in the world have expiration dates, and each must be re-evaluated as historical conditions require. History has lessons to teach us about the consequences of excessive accommodation. On the other hand, when is a strongly countercultural stance called for; and what form might it take? On the US scene today, both Jim Wallis and Rabbi Michael Lerner have felt compelled to go the latter route as regularly presented in SOJOURNERS Magazine and TIKKUN Magazine. But the theological approach is different. While Wallis in his “politics of God” maintains a strong perspective on transcendence, that dimension of biblical faith seems to be sadly lacking in Lerner’s “politics of meaning.”

There are few left-progressive causes that Rabbi Lerner does not love. What he claims they tend to lack, however, is “spirituality;” with the result that they are often not as effective as they could be. And who are the “spirituals” who can save our culture? They are “all those whose deepest values lead them to challenge the ethics of selfishness and materialism.” Belief in God is not necessary, but some kind of engagement with the “Sacred” is recommended. Biblical particularity has thus disappeared behind a New Age fog.

The late Rabbi Leon Klenecki, always a gracious and thoughtful dialogue partner, also had a certain fondness for the term “spirituality.” As a matter of fact, at times I have publicly chided him for referring to Judaism and Christianity as two “spiritualities”

(*Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Exploring our Commonalities and our Differences*, p. 65f.). But any suspicion that he too might have succumbed to pussyfooting New Age jargon is soon dispelled when reading his conversation with Richard Neuhaus in *Believing Today*. There he explains that since his teen-age years he had “felt close to Saint John of the Cross’s concept of the ‘dark night of the soul’ and the human search for God’s reality” (p. 14). A dose of mysticism need not stand in the way of sound political thinking and action. In the words of Charles Peguy, “everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.”

In those conversations, Klenicki even showed an openness for the idea of “a joint testimony of redemption,” as long as Judaism’s unique vocation is recognized and not seen as just the prelude to another’s mission, or fulfilled by another religious commitment (p. 56).

A “joint testimony of redemption” to the modern world? With those words, spoken two decades ago, Rabbi Klenicki presented a major challenge to all who are involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue. So did Father Neuhaus around that same time. “What is required,” he wrote in *The Naked Public Square*, “is the secure establishment of Christianity’s bond with living Judaism, a bonding in theology, piety, and practice that is strong enough to last for the duration—even if the duration be many millenia before the consummation of the Messianic Age” (p. 261). One is reminded of the prophet’s words in Habakkuk 2:

For there is still a vision for the appointed time,
It speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

Richard Neuhaus and Leon Klenicki were friends who could converse about things that really matter—sometimes painfully controversial things. Many of us in the dialogue movement were privileged to count them both among our friends and partners in conversation. May they rest in peace. As for the rest of us-- the challenge remains.

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