

תיקון הטבע - *Tikkun Olam* and environmental *tikkun*, *tikkun* of the Earth/planet/Nature

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Judaism is a religion that emphasizes God as Creator, that mandates a weekly celebration of Creation, that builds itself around a covenant between the land, the Creator, and the people. God's covenantal promise to Abraham is that his descendants will be a blessing for all families of the Earth, *adamah*, also meaning soil. Our ancestors understood farming to be a sacrament, and rested from farming every seven years as an even greater sacrament. (See "Genesis, Covenant, and the Land Ethic," jewcology.org/resources/genesis-covenant-jubilee-shmitah-and-the-land-ethic/.)

Are we commanded to "save the planet"? Look at this question from the opposite perspective: Would it even make sense to talk about a Judaism that permitted us to let Life on this planet be destroyed? How can we even talk about Torah in a world where civilization collapses? On a more pragmatic level, Ben Gurion University reports that climate change beyond 1.5 degrees could mean that the northern border of the Negev desert will push *into Lebanon*. How can Jews imagine themselves to be supporters of Israel if they don't care about the environment?

And yet, so often the visions of our ancestors and our leaders revolve only around what happens to human beings and human society, as if the rest of the more-than-human world would take care of itself. And so, when Jews write and talk and think about *tikkun ha'olam*, repairing the world, whether they are politically on the left or the right, they think about fixing the society or the human community, about justice or fairness for the poor, but not about justice for species that could become extinct, or for ecosystems that will become devoid of life, nor even for the human suffering that will ensue in a world where Nature turns against us.

The texts that follow illuminate a deeper way of seeing *tikkun olam*. They help us imagine how *tikkun olam* could be a calling to repair the literal world, the world of Nature, and not just the human social world. Ecological repair and the repair of our relationship to the natural world must become an essential part of *tikkun olam* if we are ever to reach that messianic time when "*Hashem* is one and God's name is one." The midrash already talks about the *tikkun* of the natural world on a cosmological level – God combines mercy with judgment for the sake of *tikkun olam*, so that this Creation will exist and thrive (text #1). But is human action to defend and protect the more-than-human world we call Nature also part of *tikkun olam*? Is that part of what we need to do for the sake of establishing society, or for bringing the Messianic era, or for all the other normative meanings of human-generated *tikkun olam*?

We learn that our ancestors believed humanity could destroy the natural world (text #2), and that they thought even God could not fix this if we let things go too far. Text #3 teaches us that other creatures, like birds, are also engaged with the divine task of *tikkun olam*. Other texts tell us that even death is part of fixing the world (#4), and that humans bear responsibility for the realms beyond humanity (#5–8). And Rav Kook imagines how the redemption of Nature is the ultimate fulfillment of Israel's redemption (text #9). There are of course a multitude of Jewish texts related to themes of ecology. The texts below focus strictly on the way *tikkun olam* is connected to those themes.

Our ancestors could never have imagined the degree to which humanity is now imperiling and destroying the more-than-human world that sustains us, so they would not have faced these questions. But *tikkun olam* of the future will necessarily embrace the *tikkun* of Creation (that is, of our corner of Creation) and of the planet.

For a broader historical picture of the term *tikkun ha'olam*, including meanings not covered here, see "29 Texts on Tikkun Olam" (<https://prtcls.com/article/tikkun-olam-source-sheet/>, or download from neohasid.org/pdf/29-texts.pdf). For links to this sheet and other resources go to: neohasid.org/resources/TO

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1. Genesis Rabbah 4:6, ~ 4th cent. בראשית רבה ד:ו

למה אין כתיב בשני כי טוב? רבי חנינא אומר: שבו נבראת מחלוקת, שנאמר: ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים. אמר רבי טביומי: אם מחלוקת שהיא לתקונו של עולם ולישובו אין בה כי טוב, מחלוקת שהיא לערובו על אחת כמה וכמה

Why is it not written about the second day [of Creation], “for it is good (*ki tov*)”? Rav Chanina says: Because on [that day] division/argument was created, as it is said (Gen. 1:6): “Let there be a separation between waters (above) and waters (below).” Said Rav Tavyomi (Rabbi “Good Day”): If a division that was [made] for establishing the world and settling it (*l’tikuno shel olam ul’yishuvo*) doesn’t have “for it is good” in it, any division to disturb [the world], all the more so.

2. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13, ~ 5th cent. קהלת רבה ז:יג

רִאֵה אֶת מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יֻכַּל לְתַקֵּן אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוֹ (קהלת ז:יג) — בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרָאוּשׁוֹ, נִטְלוּ וְהִחְזִירוּ עַל כָּל אֵילָנֵי גֶן עֵדֶן, וְאָמַר לוֹ, רִאֵה מַעֲשֵׂי כִמָּה נָאִים וּמִשְׁבָּחֵי הֵן, וְכָל מֶה שֶׁבָּרָאתִי בְּשִׁבְלֶיךָ בְּרָאתִי, תֵּן דַּעְתְּךָ שְׁלֹא תִקְלַקֵּל וְתַחְרִיב אֶת עוֹלָמִי, שָׂאֵם קִלְקֻלָּת אֵין מִי שְׂיִתְקֵן אַחֲרֶיךָ

“See the work of God – who can fix what he¹ twisted?” (Eccl. 7:13)—In the time that the Holy One created the first human, He took him and brought him around all the trees of Gan Eden, and said to him: See My works, how lovely and praiseworthy they are, and all I created, for your sake I created [it]. Put your mind [to this], that you don’t ruin or destroy my world (*olami*), for if you bring ruin, there is no one who will set [the world] right (*y’takein*) after you.

3. Devarim Rabbah 6:5, ~ 9th-10th cent. דברים רבה ו:ה

”שְׁלַח תְּשַׁלַּח אֶת הָאֵם, וְאֶת הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח-לָךְ” — אר”א לא היה צריך לומר כן אלא אמר הקב”ה הואיל ונתעסקה² בבניינו | בכבודו של עולם ובתיקונו של עולם כדי שתינצל

“[When you come across a bird’s nest on the way, the mother crouching over the nestlings or eggs], send, you will send away the mother, and the children you may take” – Said R’ Eliezer: It wouldn’t be necessary to say so, except the Holy One said, “Since she busies herself with building the world / the glory of the world and maintaining the world (*tikkuno shel olam*)”, it is right/worthwhile that she would be saved.

4. Bachya ibn Pakuda (1050-1120), Chovot Hal’vavot (Duties of the Heart), 2:3

בחיה ה' פקודה, חובות הלבבות ב:ג

וסימני החכמה בכל זה על ג' ענינים... והשנית סימנים נעלמים מן הברואים אשר לא ידע פשרם כי אם המשכיל המבין יושרם כמות הכולל כל בשר ובו תקנת העולם כמ"ש ז"ל: (בראשית א) וירא אלהים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד – והנה טוב מאד – זה המות

¹ In the verse “He” refers to God, but the midrash interprets it as referring to Adam, who is “the work of God”.

² The commonly published version of this teaching has נתעסק in the place of נתעסקה (“he busies himself” instead of “she busies herself”), but the correct version is found in numerous sources. Most sources have “glory of the world” but some have “building the world”. The latter version is consistent with *tikkun*, but the former adds a certain poetry.

The signs of the wisdom [in Creation] concern three types... and the second is signs hidden from the creatures, who don't know their solution, except for one who is enlightened and understands their rightness, like how death encompasses all flesh, and in [death] there is a fixing of the world (*takanat ha'olam*), and [the sages] said, "And God saw everything that God has made and behold, it is very good (*tov m'od*) – "behold it is very good," this means death [is very good].

5. Shlomo Marini (d. 1670, Italy), *Sefer Tikkun Olam* (1650), on Isaiah 11:8 שלמה מריני, ספר תקון עולם

וְגַר זֶאֵב עִם כֶּבֶשׂ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִתְקַן הָאָדָם אֶת מַעֲשָׂיו יִתְקַן הַטֶּבַע שֶׁנִּשְׁחַת בְּעִבּוּרוֹ וְיָשׁוּב עַל הַסֵּד' הָרָאשׁוֹן שֶׁלֹא יִהְיוּ נִזְוִי' בִּב"ה אֲלָא מִן הַצִּמְחָה וְלֹא יִרְעוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתוּ לֹא אֶת הָאָדָם וְלֹא אֶת הַבֶּעַל חַי

"And wolf will dwell with lamb..." – When humanity will fix its actions (*y'takein ha'adam et ma'asav*), Nature, which became destroyed because of humanity, will be fixed (*y'tukan hateva shenishchat ba'avuro*), and the original order [of things] will be restored, for animals won't be nourished except by plants, and none will harm and none will destroy, neither any human being nor any animal.

6. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746, Italy), *Derekh Hashem (God's Way) 2, "Israel and the Nations"*

ר' משה חיים לוצאטו, דרך ה', ח"ב, ישראל ואומות העולם

במעשיהם של ישראל תלה האדון ב"ה תיקון כל הבריאה ועילויה... ושעבד כביכול את הנהגתו לפעלם להאיר ולהשפיע או ליסתר ולהתעלם ח"ו על פי מעשיהם.

Upon the actions of Israel did the Lord blessed be hang the restoration of all Creation (*tikkun kol hab'riyah*³) and its elevation...and made God's behavior consequent upon their work to shine and to make [blessing] flow, or to close off and to be hidden, God forbid, according to their actions.

7. Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810, Ukraine), *Likutei Moharan (Teachings of Rebbe Nachman)*, 1:5

ר' נחמן מברסלב, ליקוטי מוהר"ן א:ה

נמצא, כשהעולם נברא בשבילי, צריך אני לראות ולעיין בכל עת בתיקון העולם ולמלאות חסרון העולם ולהתפלל בעבורם

One finds, since the world is created for my sake, I need to see and look in every moment into repairing the world (*b'tikkun ha'olam*), and to replenish what the world lacks, and to pray on their behalf.

8. Ben Zion Eisenstadt (1873-1951, New York), *Or Lifnei Hadorshin (Light before Seekers)*, 1916, 10

ר' בני-ציון אייזענשטאדט, אור לפני הדורשין, י

יֵשׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחֲפֹר אֶת-בְּאֵרֵת הַמַּיִם (אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בִּימֵי אַבְרָהָם אַבְיָן) וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים (בר' כו:יח): יִצְחָק חוֹפֵר וּמַמְצִיא, מִתְקַן עוֹלָם, מִשְׁתַּדֵּל בְּקִיּוּמוֹ, וְהַפְּלִשְׁתִּים סוֹתְמִים אֶת הַבְּאֵרֹת, מִשְׁתַּדְּלִים בַּחֲרִבְנֵי שֶׁל הָעוֹלָם וּבַהֲפָסְדוֹ.

"Isaac returned and dug the wells of water...and the Philistines had stopped them up" (Gen. 26:18): Isaac digs and brings forth (invents/develops), improves the world (*m'takein olam*), and the Philistines stop up the wells, strive for the destruction of the world and its depletion.

³ A synonym for *tikkun ha'olam* in Luzzatto.

9. Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook (1865-1935, Jerusalem), *Orot Hatechiyah*, (*Lights of Resurrection*, 1920), ch.28, 77 ר' אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק, אורות, אורות התחייה פ' כח, עמ' עז וגם שמונה קבצים ב' שכו-שכו 77

הקדושה שבטבע היא קדושת ארץ ישראל, והשכינה שירדה בגלות עם ישראל הוא הכשרון להעמיד קדושה בנגוד לטבע. אבל הקדושה הלוחמת נגד הטבע אינה קדושה שלמה, צריכה היא להיות בלועה בתמציתה העליונה בקדושה העליונה, שהיא הקדושה שבטבע עצמה, שהוא יסוד תקון עולם כולו וביסומו הגמור, והקודש שבגולה יחובר אל קודש הארץ... אז המלחמה חודלת לגמרי, מדת הדין מתבסמת, והכל נוטה כלפי חסד.

The holiness that is in Nature is the holiness of the Land of Israel, [while] the *Shekhinah* (divine presence) that descended into exile with [the people] Israel [has] the capability of preserving holiness [even] in opposition to what is natural. But holiness battling against Nature is not holiness [that is] whole — it needs to be absorbed into its highest essence, in supernal holiness, which is the very holiness of Nature herself, which is the foundation of repairing the world in its entirety (*tikkun olam kulo*) and its complete rapture, and [then] the Holy in the exile will be joined to the Holy of the Land... Then war will stop completely, the attribute of judgment will be enraptured, and all will incline toward lovingkindness.

Creation is the greatest living being - Gaia

Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed מורה מבוכים

1. Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else...a single being which has the same status as Zayid or Omar... Accordingly it behooves you to represent to yourself...the whole of this sphere as one living individual in motion and possessing a soul...By means of this representation it will also be made clear that the One has created [only] one being. (1:72, 184, 187; see also 2:1, 251)
2. Many are perplexed (*n'vukhim*)...over the final end of existence.... It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity... The individuals of the human species, and all the more so the other species, are things of no value at all in comparison with the whole [of Creation] that exists and endures...If you consider the Torah, the notion that we have in view will become manifest...For with reference to none of the things created is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other things. [It] only says that [g-d] brought every part of the world into existence and that it conformed to its purpose. This is the meaning of the saying: “And God saw that it was good.” About the whole, it says, “And God saw everything that [g-d] had made, and, behold, it [is] very good/*tov m'od*. [Gn 1:31]” (3:13, 449, 452-3)
3. When [Moses] asked for knowledge of the attributes...he was told: I will make all My goodness/*kol tuvi* pass before you [Ex 33:19]... All My goodness –alludes to the display to him of all existing things (creatures) of which it is said: “And God saw everything that [g-d] had made, and behold, it [is] very good.” By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how [God] governs them in general and in detail. (1:54, 124)