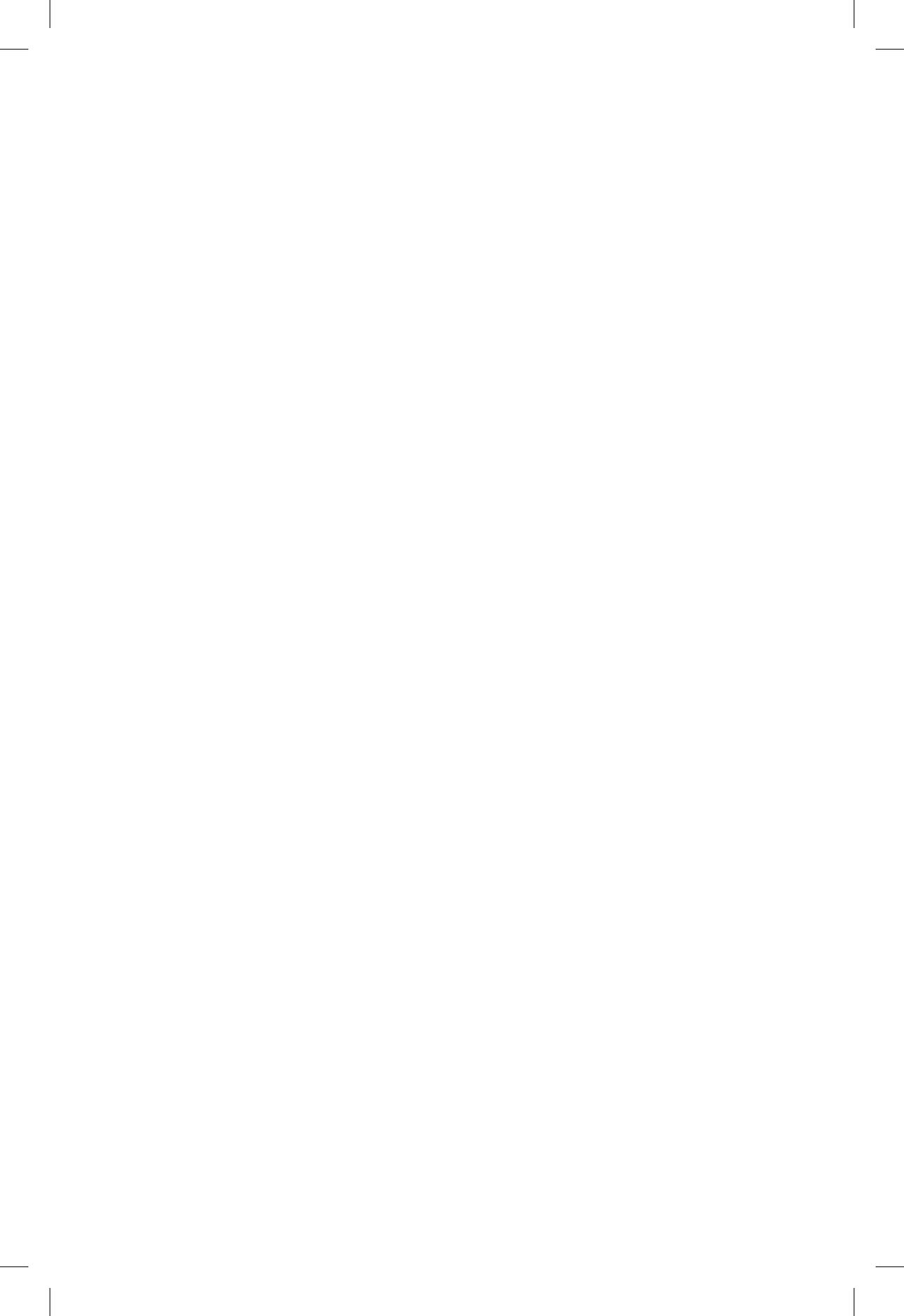


Gerald Cromer

Tikkun Olam:
Engaged Spirituality and Jewish Identity



GERALD CROMER

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JEWISH IDENTITY



The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
Bar Ilan University – Faculty of Jewish Studies
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Gerald Cromer
Tikkun Olam: Engaged Spirituality and Jewish Identity

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The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
The Faculty of Jewish Studies
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e-mail: rjcenter@mail.biu.ac.il

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Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality was founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but rather the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives available to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America. A working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness is a reflection of real flaws and weaknesses that exist in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, towards mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects

are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

Prof. Gerald Cromer is a faculty member of the Department of Criminology at Bar Ilan University and has been a research fellow of the Rappaport Center since 2003. He is not an ‘ivory tower’ academic, but rather one who is deeply committed to the repair of social problems, as is evident from a perusal of his CV (see <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/cr/>). These qualifications were apparent in his earlier research under the aegis of the Rappaport Center. Published in 2004 under the title “The Quintessential Dilemma”, this research paper surveyed and analyzed the modes in which the American Jewish community and leadership respond(ed) to intermarriage. Following the publication of that paper, Prof. Cromer initiated and chaired a 2005 international research conference of the Rappaport Center, “Contemporary Responses to Intermarriage”. A select group of academics, rabbis, educationalists and journalists from Israel and The Diaspora examined topics such as communal boundaries, reactions in different communities around the world, rabbinic responsa, intermarriage in Israel and Israel as a prophylactic to intermarriage in the Diaspora, and rationales for opposition to intermarriage.

One fascinating insight emerging from the many fruitful informal discussions held during this conference was, the extent to which Jewish activities devoted to social action and social justice – *Tikkun Olam* – are regarded favorably by many Jews whose links to ritual observance and communal organizations range from weak to non-existent. Prof. Cromer took upon himself the challenge to research the validity of this insight, and the result is the focused paper before us “Tikkun Olam: Engaged Spirituality and Jewish

Identity”. Of the study’s many significant findings, I would like to stress three.

The first is specific to the issue at hand: a wide range of Jewish activists and educators have found, that in fact,

tikkun olam is an excellent form of outreach. For those members of the community who are put off by what they feel is an overemphasis on ritual observance and/or tribal identity, repairing the world provides a more attractive way of connecting to their Jewish heritage.

The second is, Prof. Cromer’s hypothesis with regard to trends in contemporary Jewish spirituality, emerging from this study. He notes that while several scholars have concluded that search for a postmodern Jewish self,

the present study suggests that the contemporary religious search may be much broader in scope than they would have us believe. The rapid growth in the number of synagogues and other organizations engaged in tikkun olam, points to a breaking of the boundaries between public and private and sacred and secular, and to the increasing appeal of spiritual activism or what has aptly been referred to as engaged spirituality.

The third finding I would like to mention is, the significant difference, at this time, between the Jews of the United States and those of other Diaspora communities, with regard to “Tikkun Olam”. With the help of research assistants whose mother tongues were English, French, Russian and Spanish, Prof. Cromer searched for social action and social justice activities conducted as Jewish programs throughout the Diaspora. However, “very little material was found on the topic outside of the United States. It is the only country in which the idea

has become popular and been translated into reality”. After explaining the religious-cultural background to the salience of “Tikkun Olam” activities in the United States, Prof. Cromer concludes that this

is not to suggest, of course, that other communities are unable to move in the same direction. These features [of U.S. Jewry], while helpful, are by no means a necessary prerequisite for the development of the idea. Hopefully, therefore, this paper will be a goad to action rather than a source of discouragement for those who are interested in repairing the world in other parts of the globe.

In modern times, persons of Jewish descent spearheaded activities for social and political justice and reform – but they did so qua “human beings” rather than qua Jews. In our post-modern times, it is especially meaningful for Jews to involve themselves in “Tikkun Olam” both within the Jewish People and with humanity at large, thus integrating both the general and the particular aspects of their personal identity. Prof. Cromer’s study provides an account of how this is happening in the U.S., and also indicates what might be done to expand such activities within other sectors of the Jewish People – both throughout the Diaspora and in the United States itself.

* * * *

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Cromer for his seminal contribution to the endeavors of the Rappaport center, and to express appreciation to all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this paper: Ms. Iris Aaron, organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center, who was also directly responsible for proofreading and for coordination with the press; Ms. Denise Levin (text editor); the Ben Gasner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus press.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this paper is an opportunity to acknowledge the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality



Introduction¹

Writing towards the end of the turbulent Sixties, Sklare and Greenblum drew attention to the extent to which Jews on the American suburban frontier had moved from sacramentalism to moralism (Sklare and Greenblum, 1967: 89-96). When they researched the question, what was considered the keystone of being a good Jew, their respondents emphasized the importance of leading an ethical life, and only rarely mentioned the need to be ritually observant. Many were even at pains to point out that the demand for moral excellence was by no means limited to the personal realm, and also encompassed the social realm. Jews, they argued, were enjoined to change the world, as well as to better their own selves (Sklare and Greenblum, 321-326).

Subsequent studies have also pointed to the moralization of Judaism (Liebman, 1999: 315) and the tendency to focus on the commandments between man and man, rather than on those between man and God. Cohen and Eisen (2000) even discovered

1 I would like to thank Roman Berkovich, Carolina Cywiak, and Helena Haddad, who helped collect the material on which this study is based.

that moderately affiliated Jews were returning to ritual observance and making it a major locus of personal meaning. However, they found that leading an ethical and moral life was the most frequently mentioned requisite for being a good Jew, and that "the strongly universalist, politically progressive, and social-activism-oriented combination remains a significant voice within American Judaism" (Cohen and Eisen, 2000: 129).

These findings are reinforced by those of a nationwide study on the involvement of American Jews. Cohen and Fein (2001: 2) concluded that they have a high level of commitment to social justice causes and that this sense of duty is "ultimately bound up with the construction of their Jewish identities". This is particularly the case amongst the non-Orthodox. "The more liberal the denomination, the more who see social justice involvement as the heart of their Judaism and the fewer who see religious observance as the most meaningful dimension of their Jewish identity" (Cohen and Fein, 2001:32).

According to Cohen and Fein (2001:4), social justice programs consequently constitute "an untapped potential for mobilization", particularly amongst the younger generation. The key challenge, they argue, is not to change people's attitudes but, rather, to convert their sympathy and enthusiasm into action, because "teaching or preaching about *tikkun olam* (repairing/mending the world)² without providing actual hands-on experience will result simply in greater familiarity with the

2 See Dorff (2005: 7-20) for a survey of "the meaning and significance of *tikkun olam*" throughout the ages. Lerner (1986) provides perhaps the best-known contemporary interpretation of the concept.

concept, but not necessarily greater perception of social justice as a Jewishly meaningful activity” (Cohen and Fein, 2001: 33).

In recent years there has, in fact, been a marked growth in this kind of programming in the American Jewish community. Existing institutions, such as synagogues and federations, have become much more involved in community service and social justice activities, many new groups have been established, and umbrella organizations have been set up to coordinate those working in the field. These initiatives provide a wide variety of opportunities for participants to translate their concern for others into action on their behalf.

A recent book, "The Jewish Passion to Repair the World" (Schwarz, 2006), contends that the organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* are best considered under two broad headings. Some are specifically designed to safeguard and further the interests of Jews in America and elsewhere; others adopt a more inclusive stance, and extend their universe of obligation to include gentiles (Fein, 1979: 8-9). According to Schwarz (2006: 11-27), these groups are motivated by a political-ethnic and spiritual-religious variant of Jewish consciousness, respectively. Significantly, however, both kinds of organization, irrespective of their borders of concern, are at pains to point out how their efforts to mend the world are grounded in Jewish tradition.

The research paper that follows examines these attempts to provide a Jewish framework for *tikkun olam*. After describing the different modes of action, it analyzes the various rationales offered for engaging in social action and the diverse ways in which it is integrated into other aspects of Jewish life. In the concluding section, the focus of attention moves from the rhetoric and praxis of the different organizations to the wider context in which they

operate. It relates to *tikkun olam* as part of the wider spiritual search that is occurring in American society, in general, and in the Jewish community, in particular.

Modes of Action

An analysis of the organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* inside and outside the Jewish community indicates that there are six major modes of action: philanthropy, socially responsible investing, social service, community organizing, advocacy and agenda setting. Each group uses one or more of these techniques in pursuit of its goals.

Previous studies have drawn attention to the extensive network of philanthropic organizations and the high level of charitable giving in the American Jewish community (Wertheimer, 1997: 18-46). This is particularly the case since the 1990s. The enormous accumulation of wealth, resulting from a fast-growing economy and the stock market boom, has led to the appearance of many mega-donors and the rapid growth of private foundations, both in terms of numbers and assets (Tobin, 2004: 284). These trends have been accompanied by a shift from umbrella giving to hands-on giving (Wertheimer, 1997:78-80). Philanthropists are increasingly interested in contributing directly to organizations of their choice. This has led not only to a marked rise in designated giving, but also to the growth of venture philanthropy, where

donors join together to set up organizations that are specifically designed to further causes they deem as important and in need of attention (Miller, 2001).

The accumulation of wealth among American Jewry has also led to an increase in socially responsible investing. A number of organizations urge members of the community not to invest in companies that act in conflict with their values. They also encourage them to become engaged shareholders, and to try to change company policy, if and when necessary. More importantly, they have set up credit unions, loan funds and other community development financial institutions (CDFIs), which are designed to help people in low-income neighborhoods enter the economic mainstream. In doing so, these investors can make a profit for themselves, while giving the latter a chance to move from economic dependence to sufficiency, at one and the same time.³

The American Jewish community is also characterized by a high level of volunteering.⁴ Over half of the respondents in a nationwide sample reported that they were involved in social service of one kind or another (Cohen and Fein, 2001: 25), or in what is commonly referred to in Jewish tradition as *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). This voluntary activity usually fits into the regular schedule of those involved in it. It can take the form of “a good deed a day”, a weekly commitment to some form of community work, or participation in periodic

3 For more on shareholder activism and community investing, see www.jewishjustice.org.

4 Schwarz (2006: 203-211) provides an interesting description of a representative group of volunteer organizations.

mitzvah days, when individuals and families are offered a wide variety of projects to work on. There is, at the same time, an increasing number of programs where participants choose to take time out and to get more deeply involved in helping others. These range from an alternative break for high school and university students to a year of volunteer work in the United States, Israel or developing nations around the world.

A growing number of synagogues and new groups of younger people are getting involved in community organizing. This differs from more traditional forms of social service with regard to both its ends and the means used to achieve them. Through a process of consciousness raising, activists try to enable the poor and needy, both in disadvantaged areas of American cities and in developing countries around the world, to understand the reasons for their plight and to encourage them to work together to rectify the situation. Helping the disadvantaged help themselves in this way will, they hope, lead not only to the alleviation of the symptoms of their problems, but also to the elimination of their underlying causes.⁵

Many organizations, both religious and non-religious, urge their supporters to engage in advocacy on their behalf.⁶ They provide the necessary background material and contact information of the relevant legislators and public officials, and encourage potential activists to meet the latter in person, or to correspond with them in one way or another. Members of the

5 To read more on congregation based community organizing (CBCO), see www.jewishjustice.org.

Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps (www.avodah.net) is typical of the new groups that are involved in this kind of social action.

6 See, for instance, the section on advocacy tools at www.socialaction.com.

community are also encouraged to act in the same manner regarding other causes that they believe in, because advocacy is a powerful tool that can have an impact on policy, as well as being a privilege of democracy that should be utilized to the full.

Organizations sometimes see their major role as putting a particular issue on the Jewish agenda. In certain cases, they feel the need to draw attention to problems, such as the different threats to the environment that have gained recognition in wider society, but which communal leaders have not yet related to. In other instances, they are intent on breaking down the system of denial that American Jewry has set up in order to maintain the belief that a particular problem does not exist within its ranks.⁷ They argue that countering myths on Jewish immunity to poverty, drug abuse and family violence is a necessary prerequisite for admitting that they do, in fact, exist and for adopting one of the other modes of action to deal with them seriously.

7 For an interesting example of this particular kind of agenda setting, see the site of Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others (www.jacs.web.org).

Jewish Law

The organizations that were investigated invariably cite *halacha* (Jewish law) to support their ends and the means used to achieve them.⁸ Thus, the religious and communal groups dealing with poverty and related issues often quote biblical and rabbinic passages on the general obligation to help the needy and on more specific issues, such as how much money to give and in what way to do so. Particularly interesting in this respect is the extent to which these organizations refer to Maimonides' levels of charity (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10: 7-14), drawing attention to the fact that the highest one is reserved for philanthropy, which helps those in need help themselves, rather than continue being dependent on the benevolence and good will of others.⁹

Some of those engaged in advocacy or community organizing as a means of *tikkun olam* look askance at the centrality of

8 The section on *tzedakah* in Jewish tradition at www.just-tzedakah.org provides the most comprehensive and most user-friendly summary of these laws.

9 Ibid. See also Salamon (2003).

charity in the Jewish tradition. They contend that it does not deal with the basic causes of poverty and may evenacerbate them. Significantly, however, their criticism is also couched in *halachic* terms. Thus, the campaign of the Jewish Funds for Justice for a fair minimum wage is based on the biblical prohibition of oppressing hired laborers (Deuteronomy, 24: 14-15).¹⁰ Likewise, the Jewish Organizing Initiative (JOI) chose the biblical call to pursue justice (Deuteronomy 16: 20) as its motto in support of the group's demands for systemic social change. Charity (*tzedakah*), the leaders of the group argue, must cede pride of place to justice (*tzedek*) if real progress is to be made in the task of repairing the world.¹¹

Groups engaged in other areas of *tikkun olam* also appeal to *halacha*. For instance, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) recently issued a call by rabbis of all denominations for a concerted effort “to pursue a transformation of our Jewish environmental consciousness and commitment”. This plea was based, largely, at least, on the negative commandments prohibiting wanton destruction (*bal tashchit*) and cruelty to animals (*tza'ar ba'alei chaim*), and on the positive injunction to protect our own bodies (*sh'mirat haguf*). Although well aware of the fact that most American Jewry is uninformed about, or indifferent to, these and other teachings of Judaism, the rabbis expressed their hope that members of the community would embrace them because “the environmental wisdom of our tradition does not require a conversionary experience, a

10 For a wide variety of texts and programs on fair wages, see the section on Jewish resources at www.jewishjustice.org.

11 See www.jewishorganizing.org.

renunciatory lifestyle, or a suspicious stance towards science and modernity”.¹²

The American Jewish World Service (AJWS) cites both positive and negative biblical commandments in support of Jewish participation in the Darfur Action Campaign. Thus, two different texts relating to the desirable Jewish response to genocide are the negative injunction not to “stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor” (Leviticus 19:16) and the *mitzvah* to build a parapet for the roof of your new house to prevent people from falling from it and injuring themselves (Deuteronomy 22: 8). Whereas the former law only relates to the responsibility of coping with existing dangers, the latter shows that it is also incumbent on people to anticipate potential hazards, and to try and prevent them from occurring. Both commandments are concerned with threats to the lives of individuals. However, the American Jewish World Service is at pains to point out that it is not only possible, but also imperative, to apply them to different kinds of collectives. Demanding that the international community, in general, and the United States, in particular, do everything within their power to prevent the genocide in Sudan is clearly in accordance with the spirit of these laws, and a natural corollary of the Jewish imperative to preserve human life at almost any cost.¹³

Many of the organizations studied also relate to their universe

12 A full version of this statement (Wonder and Restraint: A Rabbinic Call to Environmental Action) can be found in the press release archive on the movement's website (www.coejl.org).

13 See, Responding to Genocide: Jewish Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect, in the educational resources section of the movement's website (www.ajws.org).

of obligation in *halachic* terms.¹⁴ They justify the inclusion of non-Jews by referring to the biblical idea that everyone is created in the image of God and/or to a number of rabbinic injunctions to the effect that Jews are obliged to give charity to, and act compassionately towards, gentiles. These precepts were often attributed to the desire to avoid their enmity and to ensure peaceful relations with the host society. Those presently engaged in *tikkun olam*, however, adopt a less defensive stance. They contend that the obligation to act compassionately to the stranger derives not only from self-interest, but also from a genuine concern for, and commitment to, the welfare of those beyond the confines of the community (Schacter, 2004: 12).¹⁵

The leaders of many of the organizations studied often back their inclusive and universalistic interpretations of *halacha* with references to “the prophetic legacy of Judaism” (Schwarz, 2001).¹⁶ This is particularly so in the case of those groups dealing with issues of social and economic injustice. They repeatedly claim that their actions on behalf of the most vulnerable sectors of the population are “the fulfillment of the prophetic mandate to care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan”.

14 This topic is covered in great detail in the text studies on *tzedakah*, at www.hillel.org/tzedek, pp.18-20.

15 Schacter (2004:10-11) also draws attention to the fact that, from post-biblical to the pre-modern times, Jewish texts made little or no reference to the obligation towards the welfare of society at large. However, he argues that this lacuna is a "reflection of the historical reality of a vulnerable and beleaguered community which had enough trouble taking care of itself", rather than "an expression of a reasoned ideological stance".

16 See, in particular, the website of *Panim: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values* (www.panim.org). The organization also referred to the prophets' moral courage, which enabled them to “do that which is right even when it is unpopular” and urged members to follow in their footsteps.

Jewish History

American Jewry is a community of memory (Bellah, 1985: 152-155). In common with other such collectives, its members do not only recall the group's achievements; they also evoke its shared suffering. This can, and often does, lead to the egoism of victimization. In such cases, "ethno-national groups that have been traumatized by repeated suffering at the hands of other groups seem to have little capacity to grieve for the hurts of other peoples" (Mack, 1990: 125). They are totally preoccupied with their own pain.

Aware of this danger and determined to avoid it, many of the organizations examined in the framework of this study called for what Aaron Dorfman, Director of Jewish Education at American World Jewish Service, has aptly referred to as "empathic justice". Time and again, they argued that the suffering of the Jewish people throughout its history should lead to concern for, rather than indifference to, the pain of others. Two experiences – the period of slavery in Egypt and the Holocaust – are considered to be particularly important in this regard.

Social change organizations repeatedly recall the four hundred years of oppression in Egypt. The memory of those

bitter experiences is invariably accompanied by one or other of the biblical commandments to treat those less fortunate than oneself humanely, because "you were strangers in Egypt" and, in many cases at least, by the rabbinic statement that "in every generation man is obliged to regard himself as if he personally left Egypt". The pains of the past are to be relived so that they can serve as a goad to action on behalf of those who are suffering in the present.

The organizations studied do not only resort to the founding experience of the Jewish people in order to encourage contemporary Jews to engage in *tikkun olam*; they also draw on it as a model of how to do so. Thus, in addition to citing such luminaries as Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez, the manual of the Jewish Organizing Initiative (Brown, 2005) uses the Exodus from Egypt to explain the advantages of community development over other strategies for promoting social justice, as well as to demonstrate how to do so from a Jewish perspective.

The expression "Never Again" was first used to signify the Jewish determination to avoid being the victims of another Holocaust. However, the organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* have rejected this particularistic approach and have adopted a more universalistic stance towards the threat of genocide. In the words of Michael Lerner (1994: 198), editor of *Tikkun* and one of the leaders of the Jewish Renewal Movement: "Never again means not only never again to the Jews, but never again to anyone, to any people, to any culture, to any religion, racial or ethnic group". Having suffered so much at the hands of the Nazis, Jews must do their utmost to ensure that no other ethnic group or nation experiences a similar fate in the future.

This has been one of the key messages in the current Darfur Action Campaign. Leaders of the struggle attribute their concern about the genocide in Sudan to the suffering of the Jewish people throughout the ages, and especially during the Holocaust. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, for instance, explained "our response" as follows:

What have we to do with a people we do not know, in a land we have not visited? What have we to do with people of another faith, another culture, another civilization?... We Jews see with ancient eyes. We have seen the torture, the starvation, the death by disease, the rapes, the abandonment by the civilized world before. We Jews possess a terrible knowledge, an awesome wisdom we gained not out of books, but on our own bodies. A knowledge out of the testimony of numbers seared into the skin of living human beings and the stench of burned flesh...With ancient eyes we see Darfur with a shock of recognition. We experience a collective *déjà vu* even as we speak.¹⁷

In contrast, organizations dealing with the issue of poverty also relate to the postwar experience of Jews in the United States. Comparing their increasing prosperity and good fortune with the plight of many native Americans and recent immigrants, they warn members of the community against the egoism of affluence, and remind them of their duty to help create what the Jewish Funds for Justice repeatedly refers to as "a just, fair, and compassionate America".¹⁸

17 This quotation is taken from a *d'var torah* in the educational resources section of the American Jewish World Service website (www.ajws.org).

18 See, for instance, Schwarz (2001:17).

Jewish Theology

The rhetoric of the organizations involved in *tikkun olam* is replete with God talk. They appropriate a wide variety of images of the relationship between man and God from the Jewish tradition in support of their efforts at mending the world.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice as the way to appease or serve God. The organizations studied contend that *tikkun olam* is another way of doing so. In support of their claim, they cite traditional sources, such as Yochanan Ben Zakkai's utterance that loving-kindness is an alternative way to atone for one's sins (Avot D' Rabbi Natan, 11a). Christie Balka (2002) quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel to the same effect. Recalling the latter's statement after the Selma civil rights march that he had felt that his feet were praying, Balka made a series of comparisons between political protests and religious worship to show that taking to the streets is also a way of serving God.

The rabbinic statement that man should walk after God's attributes (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a) is frequently cited by organizations fighting against poverty and discrimination of one

kind or another.¹⁹ They contend that their efforts constitute an imitation of the divine concern for the needy. They are by no means the only groups that resort to the image of following in God's footsteps. For instance, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life invoked the idea in a rather novel way: Referring to the mystical tradition that God practiced self-withdrawal (*tsumsum*) so as to enable the world to come into being, it urged members of the Jewish community to free themselves of the illusion that the world is inexhaustible, and to emulate the divine act of self-restraint in order to "keep the gates open to a healthy future for our planet and its inhabitants".

The widely held notion that people engaged in *tikkun olam* bear witness to God is derived from a verse in Isaiah (43:12): "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God". According to this image of the human-divine interaction, God only enters the world through our actions; persons engaged in repairing the world make His benevolent presence felt and thereby sanctify His name. In the oft-quoted adage of Rabbi Robert Kirschner, "God has no other hands than ours".²⁰

People engaged in *tikkun olam* often portray themselves as God's partners in the ongoing work of creating the universe. According to this view of the interaction between human and divine action, the reason God did not complete the task was so as to give man the opportunity to mend the world.²¹ Michael

19 For a very detailed example of this image of the interaction between human and divine action, see the Hillel curriculum on emulating God's ways, in the Jewish resources section of the organization's website.

20 See, for instance, Marder (2005: 71).

21 On this point, see the text studies on *tzedakah* at www.hillel.org/tzedek, pp.3-4.

Lerner (1994: 418) has taken this argument a step further. God, he ventured to say, does not only make it possible; He desires human input in both the natural and social realms, and feels pain if it is not forthcoming.

For many of those involved in social action of one kind or another, God is the force that enables the transformation from that which is, to that which ought to be. As such, the Almighty is both inspirational and sustaining. He is, at first, the urge within man to mend the world and, then, the energy that enables him to continue trying to do so. In this image of the interaction between the human and the divine, “we fulfill our godliness through the process we use to bring about a better world” (Liebling, 2003: 11).

A less common image portrays man as almost coercing God to act in a particular way. After reading the writings of sixteenth century Italian biblical commentator Seforno, Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, national program director of **Spark: Partnership for Service**, has suggested that after engaging in a dialogue about the fate of Sodom, God saved Lot and his family because Abraham had shown kindness to the angels who visited him. Human compassion, she argues, compels God to act compassionately. He is forced to follow in our footsteps.²²

These descriptions of the interaction between man and God – service, imitation, witnessing, partnership, empowerment, and coercion – are not only very different; some of them are even contradictory. They do, however, have one important feature in

22 See her article entitled, *Creating the Field of Jewish Service Learning*, first published by the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) and appearing on the website of **Spark: Partnership for Jewish Service** (www.sparkpfs.org).

common: All lead to a blurring of the traditional dichotomy of the commandments (*mitzvot*) between man and God and between man and man. In doing so, they provide a theological grounding for the integration with other aspects of Judaism that is currently emerging in the praxis of *tikkun olam*.

Three Pillars

Almost all the organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* quote Pirkei Avot (1:2): The world stands on three things: on study (*Torah*), prayer (*avodah*), and acts of loving kindness (*gemilut chasadim*). They do so in order to show that social action is as central to Judaism as learning and worship. In many cases, they take this argument a step further. Religious and communal leaders alike insist that “these three pillars of Judaism are intertwined”. It is therefore pointless, and even impossible, for one of these elements to exist without the others. Creating a synthesis between them is a necessary prerequisite for experiencing Judaism to the full. To quote the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (2004:3):

These three pillars of Jewish life are intertwined, one wrapped around the next. Is it possible to truly understand the teachings of the Torah without feeling compelled to act on behalf of the powerless and the needy? Is it possible to witness the desperate need of the vulnerable amongst us without seeking strength from beyond ourselves to respond?

Is it possible to pray to God without looking into oneself and deciding to take action and make a difference in the world? The combination of Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim* strengthens each individual value and leads one toward a fully realized Jewish life.

Many of the organizations studied have tried to attempt to implement these ideas by integrating study and action for both the Jewish community, in general, and for their members, in particular. Their websites regularly include interpretations of different aspects of *tikkun olam*, based on the weekly portion of the torah or connected to the next Jewish festival.²³ In many cases, these *divrei torah* are designed to provide support for the aims of the organization and/or the means used to achieve them.

More and more volunteer projects incorporate the learning of Jewish sources into their programs. This is particularly the case in those groups that have adopted a system of service learning which combines direct action and critical reflection (Klopp, Liptrot and Klopp, 2005). In common with other programs of this kind, participants are encouraged to make the connection between their experience in the field and broader policy questions, in order to understand the root causes of the problems they are trying to combat. The additional element of learning traditional Jewish texts enables the volunteers to explore what Judaism has

23 The Union for Reform Judaism (www.urj.org), the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (www.jrf.org), umbrella organizations such as the Jewish Coalition Service (www.jewishservice.org), and a large number of social action groups (e.g. Avodah and the American Jewish World Service) publish regular *divrei torah* on their websites. In many cases, readers are invited to subscribe, and then receive them every week by email.

to say on these issues. Doing so, it is believed, will lead, not only to the strengthening of their commitment to social action, but also to a deepening of their Jewish identity. One leads to the other; the two processes are intertwined.²⁴

The textual study often includes an examination of competing views about different topics within Judaism. This is particularly the case with regard to the appropriate universe of obligation of social action. The leaders of the organizations studied are well aware of the tendency to exclusiveness that has often characterized Judaism. As has already been pointed out, those who object to this particularistic stance draw attention to biblical and rabbinic sources that favor a more universalistic approach. Both the written and oral Torah, they insist, are in favor of working beyond the confines of the Jewish community.

There is also an increasing number of attempts to integrate social action with worship. The Reform Action Commission (RAC), for instance, has introduced the idea of saying a blessing either before or after carrying out the commandments (*mitzvot*) between man and man, in addition to between man and God.²⁵ This innovation is designed to draw attention to the fact that the different kinds of *tikkun olam* are grounded in Jewish tradition, and to deepen the awareness of the sacred nature of the attempt to repair the world.

In many cases, the prayers are also meant to be a goad to action. Thus, each year, the bi-monthly journal *Tikkun* publishes

24 See, in particular, the article by Paasche-Orlow referred to in note 22.

25 For further details about the social action blessing cards, see the publications section of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism website (www.rac.org).

a supplement to the traditional High Holiday confession. In 2006, it related to sins of both the United States government (e.g. not sharing the country's wealth with the two billion people around the world who live on less than \$2 a day) and that of Israel (e.g. allowing the trauma of the Holocaust to legitimate the oppressive treatment of others). More importantly, however, the additional confession included references to the response or, to be more precise, the lack of response, to these evils. It referred, for instance, to the sins of "dulling our outrage" and of "being cynical about the possibility of change", with the aim of prompting the readers of the magazine to take a more active role in the task of *tikkun olam* in the year to come.²⁶

The attempt to create a synthesis between the three pillars of Jewish life is perhaps most clearly seen in the development of communities of justice (*kehillat tzedek*). This initiative of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) is designed to augment the traditional role of the synagogue, as a place of worship, with a wide variety of social action programs for both individual members and the community as a whole. The latter includes the adoption of policy positions on different public issues, and the socially responsible investing of the synagogue's assets. All these activities are supposed to be integrated into the worship, lifecycle celebrations and holiday observances of the community, so as to create "a holistic vision of the essence of Jewish life".²⁷

26 For Our Sins: A Supplement to the High Holiday Prayerbook. Tikkun, September/October 2006.

27 The ideology underlying this initiative and the different forms it can take are described in Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (2006).

The Jewish Year

The organizations studied do not only try to integrate social action with study and prayer; they also work on creating a synthesis between *tikkun olam* and the observance of religious rituals, particularly those connected with the cycle of the Jewish year. A growing number of publications and websites include interpretations of the different Festivals, accompanied by suggestions for activities designed to link them with a wide variety of social issues, thereby ensuring that they are always on the communal agenda.

Mention has already been made of the centrality of the slavery in Egypt in the historical consciousness of those engaged in *tikkun olam*. While this is the case throughout the year, it is particularly so around Passover, one of the two most popular festivals of American Jews. The organizations studied have added readings to the traditional *haggada*,²⁸ or produced completely new *haggadot* relating to issues such as hunger, homelessness,

28 See, for example, the annual supplement to the *haggadah* in the March/April issue of *Tikkun*.

and oppression.²⁹ In most cases, the liturgical innovations draw attention to contemporary examples of these problems (e.g. the plight of illegal immigrants to the United States and the slavery and genocide in Darfur), and emphasize the obligation to get involved in the fight against them.

Chanukah, the other popular festival, provides the starting point for discussions and activities about issues such as religious liberty and economic justice. Of particular interest is the recent trend to connect it to global warming and the depletion of the world's energy resources. Thus, the Union for Reform Judaism, The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism (USCJ), and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) have all urged synagogues, other communal institutions, and individuals to use compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) in order to conserve energy and to minimize the damage to the environment. On a grander scale, Rabbi Arthur Waskow (2006), founder and director of the Shalom Center, recently urged American Jews not only to change their own personal consumption patterns, but also to try and influence the government's energy policy in order to emulate the miracle of Chanukah and to achieve a seven-eighths reduction in United States oil consumption by the year 2020.

The Union for Reform Judaism and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation have both published social action guides for all the Jewish festivals, including those that are observed by only a very small proportion of their members. The Reform Movement handbook on Purim, for instance, takes a central theme of the festival – the changing fortunes of

29 A number of these *haggadot* are reviewed in the holiday guides section of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism website (www.rac.org).

the Jews and their enemies – and uses it to develop the idea of “turning injustice on its head”:³⁰ The persecution of the Jews acts as a trigger for a discussion of intolerance of other ethnic minorities; the treatment of the two wives of King Ahasuerus, Vashti and Esther, provides the basis for an essay on violence and discrimination against women; the *mitzvah* of giving gifts to the poor leads to a critique of economic inequality in the United States and elsewhere. As always, the guide does not simply describe these problems: It suggests a number of ways of dealing with them and urges congregants to do so.

Cheshvan is the one month of the Jewish year during which there are no Festivals. In 2005 a number of organizations took the initiative and declared it “Jewish Social Action Month” (JSAM). Coming immediately after the High Holidays, which are devoted to personal or internal improvement (*tikkun penimi*), Jews in Israel and the Diaspora are urged to turn their attention to the world around them and to find some way of trying to mend it (*tikkun olam*). The idea has since been endorsed by over two hundred organizations and has led to hundreds of one-time and long-term projects.³¹ If this trend continues, social action will have a space or, to be more precise, a time of its own in the cycle of the Jewish year.

30 See the section on Purim at www.rac.org/pubs/holidayguides.

31 For a detailed description of the projects carried out under the auspices of this program, see www.cheshvan.org.

Eco-Kashrut

A number of organizations have tried to build a connection between their efforts to repair the world and the Jewish dietary laws. They have adopted Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's concept of *eco-kashrut* (1993: 269-271) in an attempt to extend them to a wide range of ethical issues. Their aim, according to one of his best-known and creative followers, is to develop "a broader sense of good everyday practice that draws on the wellsprings of Jewish wisdom and tradition about the relationships between human beings and the earth" (Waskow, 1995: 117).

As in the rabbinic statement of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, referred to above, ecological organizations cite a wide variety of traditional concepts in support of their cause. Not surprisingly, therefore, they are always at pains to point out the relevance of these time-honored ideas to contemporary problems. The injunction against cruelty to animals (*tza'ar ba'alei chaim*), for instance, provides the basis for an attack on modern methods of raising animals under super productive factory conditions, and the rabbinic rulings against wanton destruction (*bal tashchit*) are applied to the increasingly

widespread practice of spraying the earth with pesticides. American Jews are not only urged to refrain from engaging in these and other harmful practices; they are also encouraged to stop eating any kind of food, the production of which causes harm to the environment. God, it is repeated time and again, put man on earth “to cultivate and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15).³²

The concept of protecting one’s body (*sh’mirat haguf*) provides the basis for an additional argument in favor of *eco-kashrut*. Environmental activists urge American Jews to forego foods that contain carcinogens and other harmful ingredients, and encourage them to eat natural products in order to safeguard their health. One organization, *Tuv Ha’aretz*, has also begun to develop community supported agriculture (CSA) in a number of synagogues and community centers. In addition to ensuring a regular supply of organic fruits and vegetables to members of the project, it provides local farmers with a steady income throughout the year and thereby promotes sustainable agriculture.³³

The concept of *eco-kashrut* goes well beyond the consumption of food, to incorporate a wide variety of non-edible goods. Thus, the efforts of Jewish environmental organizations to persuade members of the community to use recyclable products, dispose of their waste in an eco-friendly way, and conserve energy often fall under its rubric. In a recent “Beyond Oil” campaign, for instance, the Shalom Center went over and above the widespread call to install energy saving light bulbs, and suggested that people’s next

32 See, for instance, Rabbi Goldie Milgram's essay on eco-spirituality at www.rebgoldie.com.

33 *Tuv Ha'aretz* has a double meaning. It can be understood as good from the land and/or good for the land. For further details of the organization see www.hazon.org.

car be fuel-efficient or hybrid. In doing so, it coined a new phrase. Henceforth, Waskow and Agdern (2006: 71) argued, American Jews should only buy “*Kosher Kars*”.

The *Eco-Kosher* Project is not limited to environmental concerns; it also relates to issues of social and economic oppression. Many Jewish ecological organizations cite the biblical prohibition against oppressing hired laborers (Deuteronomy, 24: 14-15), and use it as the basis for a critique of modern forms of worker exploitation in both the United States and elsewhere. They try to persuade community members not to engage in such practices and to boycott those companies that do. In particular, advocates of *eco-kashrut* urge their coreligionists to only buy and eat food that has been grown or produced by workers who received Fair Trade wages.³⁴ The way those who provide our sustenance are treated is of as much concern as the fruit of their labor.

34 See, in particular, www.catskillmtcoffee.com.

Engaged Spirituality

The rationales offered for engaging in *tikkun olam* and for the different ways of integrating it with other facets of Jewish life are twofold: to promote social justice and to enhance Jewish identity. No research has been carried out to see whether either of these processes do, in fact, occur. Nevertheless, the leaders of many organizations repeatedly refer to the symbiotic relationship between these agendas. They, at least, are convinced that the strengthening of one leads to the reinforcement of the other.³⁵

“If you are going to organize”, Michael Brown (2005) has argued, “It helps to know who you are and where you come from. Those who appreciate their history, tradition and culture, those grounded in spirit and deeply held values, tend to work more effectively for justice over the long haul”. Brown and others contend that this self-assurance, coupled with the feeling of being part of a like-minded community, not only help people to get involved in the first place, but also enables them to cope with the inevitable

35 Waskow (1992), for instance, argued that the greening of Judaism would help save both the endangered planet and the Jews, an endangered people.

frustrations of volunteer work, and to persevere in their efforts to mend the world.

Tikkun olam is a means, as well as an end. As Ruth Messinger argued in her foreword to *Judaism and Justice* (Schwarz, 2006: 13), “Working in various settings to help repair and improve the world offers entry and reentry points for Jews who find meaning in these activities and who can, through this work, develop a new appreciation of Judaism”. She, in common with the leaders of almost all of the organizations studied, believes that *tikkun olam* is an excellent form of outreach.³⁶ For those members of the community who are deterred by what they feel to be an overemphasis on ritual observance and/or tribal identity, repairing the world provides a more attractive way of connecting to their Jewish heritage.

This is not to suggest, of course, that social action is offered as a substitute for other kinds of Jewish involvement. The organizations studied regard it as an additional, rather than an alternative, link to things Jewish. In fact, many of them have tried to create a synthesis between the *mitzvot* between man and man and between man and God. In such cases, *tikkun olam* has become the focus of an interpretive community of traditional Jewish texts (Hartman, 2000: 165), as well as the heart of a process of godwrestling by means of which members examine the inner meanings of religious rituals and draw analogous practices from them (Waskow, 1978).

36 Many leaders of organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* are also of the opinion that it can revitalize synagogue life. See, for instance, *Jewish Funds for Justice* (2003).

These developments are particularly marked in the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements, and to a lesser extent in the Conservative Movement. Modern Orthodox thinkers often quote a seminal essay of Rav Soloveitchik (1964), in which he argued that the obligation to make the world better derives from God's charge to Adam and Eve, rather than from Sinaitic revelation, and that it is therefore "implicit in human existence" (Shatz et al. 1997). On the other hand, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and other organizations of the same ilk are much less involved in the different kinds of *tikkun olam* described in this paper. Moreover, when the latter groups do engage in social action, they rarely relate to it as an entry point into Judaism, because a strong sense of belonging is taken as given.

Clearly, these trends in the non-Orthodox denominations and in the other ostensibly non-religious organizations is part of the search for a postmodern Jewish self (Cohen and Eisen, 2000: 34-42) and of the more general shift from a spirituality of dwelling, to a spirituality of seeking, in American society (Wuthnow, 1998: 3). Several scholars have concluded that this *zeitgeist* is most marked in the private sphere, and that it has led to a renewed interest in ritual observance, in particular (Cohen and Eisen, 2000), and in Jewish culture, in general (Horowitz, 2003). However, the present study suggests that the contemporary religious search may be much broader in scope than they would have us believe. The rapid growth in the number of synagogues and other organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* points to a breaking of the boundaries between the public and the private and between the sacred and the secular, and to the increasing appeal of spiritual activism (Horowitz, 2003) – or what Stanczak (2006) aptly refers to as "engaged spirituality".

It is therefore imperative to include this aspect of the search for a postmodern Jewish self in future research studies. Henceforth, they should examine whether *tikkun olam* provides an initial connection to Judaism for those hitherto unaffiliated to the community and/or an additional link for those already involved. In addition, it is important to investigate whether either or both of these populations create the kind of synthesis between the *mitzvot* between man and God and between man and man described in this paper.³⁷ To the extent that the organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* do, in fact, achieve any of these goals, they will have succeeded in repairing the world and the Jewish community at one and the same time.

37 On this point, see Green (1992: 179-180). He lamented the "division of labor" between Jews who are concerned with *tikkun olam* and those who focus on ritual observance and Torah study and called for a rebalancing of the three pillars of Judaism in order to heal the rift between them.

America and Beyond

Readers of this paper may, understandably, receive the impression that the research on which it is based was limited to American Jewry. That was not the case. A comprehensive search was carried out for organizations engaged in *tikkun olam* in Jewish communities around the world. However, very little material was found on the topic outside of the United States. It is the only country in which the idea has become popular and has been translated into reality.

Further research is needed to determine why this is the case. A preliminary analysis suggests that it is due, at least largely, to the prominence of the Jewish Renewal and Reform Movements in American Jewry. The former was and, for that matter, still is, the source of many of the ideas and programs described in this paper. Reform Judaism has always placed an emphasis on working for social justice. However, as a result of the return to tradition within the movement, this kind of activity is increasingly referred to as *tikkun olam* and, more importantly, is becoming part of a concerted attempt to create a synthesis between the *mitzvot* between man and man and between man and God – or what many Reform leaders refer to as “a full Jewish life”.

Pointing out those aspects of American Jewry that have led to the growing emphasis on *tikkun olam* is not to suggest, of course, that other communities are unable to move in the same direction. These features, while helpful, are by no means a necessary prerequisite for the development of the idea. Hopefully, therefore, this paper will be a goad to action, rather than a source of discouragement for those who are interested in repairing the world in other parts of the globe.

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