

Tikkun Olam Is Reform's "Religious Genius"

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When I worked in the Senate, there was a Haredi rabbi who used to hang around our office building. I remember a conversation I had with him once.

When I told him I was going to be applying to rabbinic school at Hebrew Union College, he said: "When are you Reform Jews going to stop talking about *tikkun olam* and do something *religious*?"

(I recently looked him up. He's known as "the Brooklyn Bundler." Turns out, he's since been convicted of fraud and extortion—of Mets owner Steve Cohen!)

Anyway, his critique of Reform Judaism is a common one. To quote [one of the commenters](#) on the *Forward's* article about us last week: "Watered down *tikkun olam* Judaism which tries to fit into the norms of a society at any time in history will eventually assimilate and vanish because it is empty and future generations will see no reason to not fully be like everyone else."¹

But this idea that *tikkun olam*–focused Judaism is somehow not "religious" is belied by the Torah itself.

This week we read *Leviticus* Chapter 19, known as the "Holiness Code." It begins with the famous statement, "*K'doshim tih'yu*—You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy." (*Lev. 19:2*) And what are we supposed to do to be holy?

Honor our parents. Don't worship idols. Offer sacrifices properly. Leave the corners of our fields for the poor. Don't steal or deceive people. Don't swear falsely by God's name. Don't insult the deaf or trick the blind. Keep Shabbat.

The Holiness Code includes commandments of ritual observance *and* commandments of social ethics. The Torah makes no distinction between them. All of them are "religious."

Rabbi Abraham Geiger, one of the German founders of Reform Judaism, used to say that the Jewish people have "a genius for religion." Whereas other cultures gave the world science, art, and philosophy, our unique contribution, he said, is ethical monotheism—the insight that one God is behind all of existence, and that God demands from humanity both devotion and morality.

The Jewish people's role is to make that truth "manifest throughout the world."² To quote Isaiah:

The many peoples shall go and say:
"Come,
Let us go up to the Mount of *God*,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That we may be instructed in God's ways,
And that we may walk in God's paths."
For instruction shall come forth from Zion,
The word of *God* from Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 2:3)

Importantly, Rabbi Geiger said it is the Jewish people's calling *as a whole* to be the ambassadors of monotheism. But the "task [might be] too heavy" (Ex. 18:18) for any one group of human beings to pursue fully.

Maybe, on a spiritual level, that's why Judaism developed different movements—so we could delegate the various elements of our divine mission to subgroups, each with a genius for different aspects of religion.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, the founder of the Open Orthodox movement, hints at this idea in a famous essay.

He notes proudly that "the Orthodox community is blessed with large numbers of ritually observant Jews...myriads of people [who] meticulously keep Shabbat...Kashrut...the Laws of Family Purity and pray three times a day."³

As Rabbi Geiger might have put it, Orthodox Jews have a genius for ritual practice. They make God's presence known in the world through daily piety and deep Torah learning.

But Rabbi Weiss is also a committed pluralist. He values the contributions made by the other movements as well and argues that they complement and strengthen one another.

"Consciously or not," he writes, "we have all learned from each other. The Orthodox movement has in some measure emulated the Conservative movement's model of the synagogue as a community center. The Reform and Conservative movements' greater sensitivity to day-school education and increased emphasis on ritual and learning Torah in Jewish life has much to do with Orthodox influence.

"And there is much more to be learned. Orthodox Jewry should adopt elements of the Reform and Reconstructionist universalistic agenda of *tikkun olam*, 'repair of the world.' "⁴

Rabbi Weiss is right. We Reform Jews might not do ritual observance as well as Orthodox Jews do, but no movement does *tikkun olam* better than Reform Judaism.

Our bona fides on social action and civil rights are unimpeachable. Did you know the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism?

At this moment in time, when civil rights and human dignity are under assault by a masked military force deployed on American streets, when mass detention centers are being built around the country, and when human beings not even convicted of a crime are being forced to drink toilet water, deprived of sleep, and shuttled around in secret to circumvent their legal rights—what does the world need from religion more than a strong voice for justice and morality?

The Reform population in Great Neck today is indeed smaller than it was in the past, but the world needs repair—*tikkun olam*—more than ever. If *we* don't provide that Jewish voice, who will?

There are many critics of Reform's emphasis on *tikkun olam* because, they say, it de-prioritizes spiritual practice and particularist identity. I was one of them—until Trump came along and broke the moral foundation of the world so profoundly that

keeping silent and focusing on study and prayer feels not only religiously inadequate, but devoid of Jewish integrity.

The voices of the prophets ring in my ears and take me back to the Reform Judaism of my youth.

Tikkun olam is our special religious genius, and the collective Jewish mission to “be a light to the nations” *needs* us right now.

This is the Reform moment. We will rise to meet it?

1 https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1542230981242096&id=100063656274151&comment_id=2042789383315905&rdid=8QittqbsbdkgAKFT#

2 From “Let Us Adore,” a classical Reform Jewish liturgical hymn, corresponding to the traditional “Aleinu” prayer.

3 Avraham Weiss, “Open Orthodoxy! A Modern Orthodox Rabbi’s Creed,” *Judaism* (Fall 1997), 411.

4 *Ibid.*, 416.