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The Debate about *Tikkun Olam* in the Jewish-American Community

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The expression *tikkun olam* still plays only a minor role in the Jewish communities in Europe in general and Germany in particular. Neither is it regarded as a central element of Jewish life in Israel. Irrespective of the various evaluations of the expression for Judaism, which I will examine in this chapter, it is hardly contested that *tikkun olam* is something characteristically American. Having discussed a few occurrences of the expression in Israel and beyond, Levi Cooper sums up the situation in his article “The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam” in the following way: “The banner of *tikkun olam* largely remains an American phenomenon” (25).

This may have somewhat changed in the ten years since Cooper’s article appeared. The American influence concerning *tikkun olam* has not only become noticeable in Israel, the buzzword is now reaching Germany as well: in the video blog *GanzErlich*, which features explanatory videos on the Jewish faith (“An was glauben Juden?“), the Israeli host Asaf Erlich recently dedicated an episode to the concept. Another example is an event for interfaith dialogue that took place in Augsburg, Germany, in October 2022 under the title “Tikkun Olam: Improving the World Together” (“Tikkun Olam: Gemeinsam die Welt verbessern“).

Despite individual cases of the use of the term outside the US, it is only there that *tikkun olam* constitutes a key concept in the Jewish community. Jonathan Krasner speaks of both the “Americanization of *tikkun olam*” and the “‘*tikkun olam*-ization’ of American Judaism” (Krasner, “Americanization”). Jonathan Neumann, one of the most severe critics of the phrase, concurs: “One simply cannot begin to understand American Judaism today without understanding *tikkun olam*” (28). The centrality of *tikkun olam* to the US is summed up in the joke about an American Jew coming to Israel for the first time and asking his Israeli cousin at the airport, “How do you say *tikkun olam* in Hebrew?” (e.g. Sherwin 43).

I want to contribute to an understanding of *tikkun olam* – what are the possible meanings of the term, where does it come from, and how does it shape Judaism in the US today? – but most importantly, I hope to offer insights into the discussion surrounding the term as it has been conducted with great passion in America in recent years. In a further step, this chapter will use the debate over *tikkun olam* to accentuate general problems with drawing a line between religious Judaism and Jewish secularism.

Possible Meanings of the Phrase *Tikkun Olam*

While in today's popular parlance the phrase most commonly appears in the truncated form *tikkun olam*, in rabbinic literature, the article is provided to form *tikkun ha-olam* or a preposition is used: *tikkuno shel-olam*. Gilbert S. Rosenthal laments that "the correct classical term has been effectively replaced" (Rosenthal 214-15).

The semantics of the two words *tikkun* and *olam* are hardly straightforward in isolation. In combination, things get even more complex. *Tikkun* is most commonly translated as 'repair,' 'mend,' 'heal,' 'improve,' 'perfect,' or 'rectify' and the meaning of *olam* is usually given as 'world,' 'all the people,' or the 'community,' but it can also stand for 'eternity' (Neumann 120-21). The English phrases 'repairing the world' or 'mending the world' are based on the assumption that the world is broken in some fashion. Crucially, you need someone or some power to carry out the repair. The verb 'to heal' has similar premises but does not draw attention to the agent quite as strongly. The translation as 'improving the world' does not necessarily imply that the world is broken, only that there is room for improvement. Who could deny this? 'Perfecting' even assumes that the world is already fairly good but can be made even better. In this translation, an eschatological component of the phrase is recognized. Some actually regard *tikkun olam* as an effort to achieve the messianic age (Sherwin 52; Greenberg 67).

The mere words combined to *tikkun olam* do not specify who is to make the effort, who is to do the repair. God? The Jews? God and His people together? Everybody? What contributes to the repair of the world? The observance of the *mitzvot*, the 613 commandments, by the Jews? The observance of Noahide laws by the gentiles? Mystical contemplation? Social and environmental action? Political campaigns? And if we look at the meaning of *olam*: are we talking about repairing or salvaging the whole world with all the people in it or about the Jewish community only? In other words, is *tikkun olam* a universalistic or a particularistic concept?

In theory, there are all these possibilities and even more, but in established usage in the US nowadays, *tikkun olam* is more often than not equated with "social justice." Cooper begins his essay with the following observation: "Tikkun olam is most commonly heard as a slogan for activism, political involvement and social justice" (10). At the same time, the expression "social justice" is hardly self-explanatory either. Traditionally, the phrase mainly described concern for a more egalitarian society in terms of income and wealth, but it has recently included other aspects of progressive politics as well – from gender diversity to multilateral or pacifist foreign policy, from support for the Black Lives Matter movement to the abolition of fossil fuels. It comes as no surprise that the use of the term "social justice" for these issues has come under fire from conservative politicians and commentators. The neoconservative critic Noah Rothman, for instance, comes down hard on the social justice movement. The blurb to his book *Unjust: Social*

Justice and the Unmaking of America (2019) begins with the following claim: “There are just two problems with ‘social justice’: it’s not social and it’s not just. Rather, it is a toxic ideology that encourages division, anger, and vengeance.” Naturally, *tikkun olam* as understood as ‘social justice’ has drawn similar criticism. In recent years, many of the ideas that are subsumed under the slogan *tikkun olam* have been referred to by the equally contested concept of “wokeness.” And indeed, the term ‘woke’ has come up in the debate about *tikkun olam* (Brawer and Romain).

A wide array of stickers, pins, and T-shirts with *tikkun olam* and “social justice” issues demonstrates this meaning. The phrase “Tikkun Olam means Black Lives Matter” – תקון עולם occasionally written with Hebrew letters – is offered in a variety of T-shirt designs by several providers on the web. The motto “Be Gay Do Tikkun Olam” is available as a pastel-colored art print on the platform *Etsy*. There, you can also order a T-shirt with the caption “We need a Mensch – Tikkun Olam” under Bernie Sanders’s face. Sometimes the term תקון עולם is combined with a recycling symbol or a similar icon of the environmentalist movement. For completeness, it must be mentioned that there is also an Israeli brand of medical cannabis with the name Tikun Olam – according to their website tikunolam.com, the “world’s first organization licensed by a national government to treat patients with medical cannabis.”

The Use of *Tikkun Olam* by Jewish Congregations

The term *tikkun olam* frequently appears on the homepages of American synagogue congregations, particularly those of the denominations Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative.¹ This can be illustrated by some important synagogues in New York City. Emanu-El, probably the most eminent Reform congregation in America, has an entry for “Volunteering and Tikkun Olam” on its homepage. Following this link, you can learn more about their “Tikkun Olam Committee” and read their “Tikkun Olam Report,” which mainly lists philanthropic activities and community outreach. The Central Synagogue in Manhattan, another large Reform congregation, assigns an even more important position to *tikkun olam*, here with a more political bend. Before specifying activities in the fields of “Criminal Justice Reform,” “Ending Mass Incarceration,” “Climate Justice,” etc., the website emphasizes the importance of the concept: “*Tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, is a bedrock value of Jewish faith. Practicing it is not only

¹ Conservative Judaism, which developed in late nineteenth-century America, should not be conflated with Orthodoxy. Rather, this branch of Judaism, which turned against the alleged excesses of parts of the Reform movement, takes a middle way between Orthodoxy and Reform. In this article, I adhere to the practice of referring to the Jewish denomination with a capital C and to the political orientation with a lowercase c.

a way for us to make our world a better place, but it strengthens our Jewish identity and demonstrates our values.” The East End Temple, a smaller Reform congregation, puts “Tikkun Olam” in brackets behind a link to “Social Justice” under their “Community” tab. The respective page provides explanations on the centrality of social justice “for a meaningful and responsible Jewish life.” Among the activities listed are charitable contributions as well as political campaigns like hosting “rallies in support of immigrant rights.” The Conservative Park Avenue Synagogue also has an entry for “Tikkun Olam” under their “Adult Engagement” tab. The webpage informs about charity but also emphasizes the significance of education for “healing the world.” The Reconstructionist Congregation of the West End Synagogue in Manhattan also features an entry for “Tikkun Olam – Social Action/Justice” on their website and explains: “At West End Synagogue, Judaism is a call to pursue justice in our society and our world. We take seriously the Hebrew phrase Tikkun Olam, which literally means ‘repair of the world.’” Their activities span from support for the local soup kitchen to human rights campaigns.

The homepages of synagogues that call themselves Orthodox or modern Orthodox use the term more sparingly. Where it does occur, for example on the website of Park East Synagogue in Manhattan, it is usually not placed as prominently. Most Orthodox and Sephardic congregations dispense with the term. If you type in the term “Tikkun Olam” in the search function of the website of New York’s oldest synagogue congregation Shearith Israel, also known as the “Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue,” the message “Nothing Found” comes up. The congregation’s rabbi Meir Soloveichik has actually voiced skepticism about *tikkun olam* in the ‘social justice’ sense of the word (“Remember” 12) and even mockingly formed the neologism “tikkunolamitude” to denounce “a version of Jewishness that is utterly consonant with the zeitgeist” (Yiddish 14). The term *tikkun olam* does not feature on the homepage of the (largely Moroccan) Manhattan Sephardic Congregation either.

If it is the case that *tikkun olam* is a core value of the Jewish faith, as the Central Synagogue website would have us believe, it may be surprising that Orthodox congregations largely avoid the term, particularly if we look at the phenomenon from a linguistic perspective. As a Hebrew term, *tikkun olam* belongs to a language that was downgraded by the Reform movement in the nineteenth century: Prayer books were often written in the vernacular. This changed somewhat after the Shoah, but the role of *loshn koydesh*, the Holy Tongue, is more important in Orthodoxy than in the American Reform movement.

From the self-descriptions of the synagogue communities, we can thus infer that *tikkun olam* helps to foster a connection between American Jews but that Orthodoxy is not entirely on board with this identity. However, the debate about *tikkun*

olam does not only hinge upon the differences between Jewish denominations but is primarily related to political orientations.

The Political Dynamism of *Tikkun Olam*

The political component of *tikkun olam* can be illustrated by an episode of *The Ben Shapiro Show*, the most successful conservative podcast in the U.S., which also ranks among the top ten podcasts in the nation generally (*Podtrac*). Shapiro, who has been called “the most popular Orthodox Jew in the World” (*Meaningful People*), mainly comments on current political issues on the show, but from time to time also addresses distinctly Jewish topics.

In the episode published on December 17, 2020, he critically engaged with the video greeting for Hanukkah by Kamala Harris and her Jewish husband Douglas Emhoff (see also Halon). Late 2020 was the time of the transition from the Trump/Pence to the Biden/Harris administration and Harris evidently wanted to signal her solidarity with the Jewish community. Ben Shapiro’s critique is primarily directed at what he considers a grave misinterpretation of the Jewish holiday. After playing a few seconds of the video, he starts pouring ridicule on Harris for characterizing Hanukkah as being “about the light, and bringing light where there has been darkness” (Shapiro 3:00-3:06). His most sneering reaction is, however, reserved for her remark that the Jewish holiday is also a celebration of *tikkun olam*. As soon as she pronounces these words on her video, Shapiro asks his technical aids to “stop this crap” (3:17-3:20) and scoffs at the concept as it is used by Harris: “*Tikkun olam* is this bullcrap nonsense pushed by the left, in which they reinterpret the phrase *tikkun olam* to mean a bunch of leftist social justice warrior nonsense” (3:56-4:07). He then elaborates on the origin of the concept in the Kabbalah and emphasizes that the destroyed order of the world can only be reestablished by following the commandments: “The notion of *tikkun olam* is not about some broad social justice agenda, it’s about you following particular commandments, 613 of them, in order to rectify the breeches that were created when God created the universe” (4:20-4:31). He furthermore insists that “*tikkun olam* is not considered a central part of Jewish philosophy until very late in Jewish philosophy, like namely the 20th century” (4:48-4:55) and adds that in Orthodox Judaism “*tikkun olam* is not a central part of what we talk about ever” (5:04-5:07). For Shapiro, the left’s use of *tikkun olam* constitutes a “rewriting of Judaism into a bunch of leftist claptrap” (5:26-5:29).

Clearly, here the axes of political orientation and of religious denominations overlap. For Shapiro,² *tikkun olam* is decidedly left-wing and unquestionably non-Orthodox and the way it is used today has nothing to do with Judaism. Shapiro also touches on the origins of the concept but only addresses the Kabbalah.

Tikkun Olam: From Traditional Jewish Sources to the Present

So where does *tikkun olam* come from? First, it must be noted that the phrase does not occur in the Tanakh. Even the word “*tikkun*” or “*le-taken*” alone appears only three times: all of the occurrences are in Kohelet (Rosenthal 215). As is typical of the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher considers all efforts to repair in vain, for, *כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עוותו* ‘Who can straighten, what He has twisted?’ (Ecc. 7:13; JPS Tanakh).

Most Jews will be familiar with the expression *לתקן עולם במלכות שדי* “*le-taken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*” from the Aleinu prayer, which can be translated as: “the repair of the world under the kingdom of God” (Krasner, “The Place” 63). While the prayer, which insists on God’s supreme authority, does not explicitly state how the repairing or perfecting will be accomplished, the context implies that *tikkun olam* is God’s task. Rosenthal comments on the meaning of the phrase in the familiar prayer: “God, rather than humans, will repair the world” (221). Cooper concurs: “[T]ikkun olam in ‘*Aleinu* speaks of God and not humanity repairing the world” (13).

Seeking the origin of today’s *tikkun olam* in the Aleinu is further complicated by the fact that in the Yemenite tradition, the first word is spelled and pronounced slightly differently: instead of *לתקן* “*letaken*” with ק kuf, *לתכן* “*letakhen*” with כ khaf. Mitchell First considers the Yemenite practice to be the authentic one (191-93), which would also entail a different meaning: ‘establishing’ the kingdom of God rather than ‘repairing’ or ‘perfecting’ it. Then the Aleinu prayer would have nothing at all to do with *תקון עולם* *tikkun olam* as it is known today.

In the Talmud, one occasionally encounters the phrase *מפני תיקון העולם* “*mipnei Tikkun Ha-olam*” – a formula that has received various translations, such as “for the sake of the improvement or stabilization of society” (Krasner, “The Place” 63) or “for the sake of the public interest” (Halkin). Most of the appearances are from the Gittin tractate of the Mishnah, which primarily deals with halakhic divorce (Rosenthal 217). Nils Ederberg emphasizes that *olam* here refers to the totality of

² That Shapiro’s view is fairly representative of conservative voices in the Jewish community is revealed by a look at the endorsements of Jonathan Neumann’s book *To Heal the World*. There, several conservative scholars and pundits fulminate against the “misguided and agenda-driven left-wing icons and activists” (Avraham Gordimer), the “distorted Judaism” of the left (Gil Student) and relish the “excoriation of the Jewish left” by Neumann (David P. Goldman) (Neumann, blurb).

Jews, not the world or humanity as a whole. The goal, he adds, is not social justice, but the stabilization of the community.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, the term *tikkun* appears frequently, occasionally in the phrase *tikkun olam*. According to the highly complex mythological system of Isaac Luria (1534-72), God contracted himself to make room for the creation of the world. As He could not leave it without His presence either, light emanated from Him. Being too strong for its containers, the light caused the rupture of the vessels, fragments of which were thus scattered throughout the world. The idea of *tikkun* means that it is upon humans to contribute to the repair of the fragmented vessels and return the divine light to its origin, thus mending a disturbed cosmic order (Sacks 110). Jews do this through observance of the *mitzvot* and contemplative efforts. Lawrence Fine emphasizes the eschatological nature of the concept in his article about the Lurianic origins of *tikkun olam*: “All existence will return to its original spiritual condition, a state synonymous with the messianic age” (39) Lurianism entails the utter rejection of the present world: “Thus, the *tikkun* of which Lurianic Kabbalah speaks is not that of *this* world, but of ‘worlds’ beyond it” (39).

The phrase *tikkun olam* did not play a major role in the course of much of its history. Cooper mentions a few publications from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that have the term in their title (16). Luria’s ideas were disseminated in the twentieth century by Gershom Scholem. At times, they also played a role in Jewish theodicy in the wake of the Holocaust. Emil Fackenheim’s 1982 book *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (later subtitled *Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*) refers to the concept in its very title. While Fine elaborates on the differences between Lurianism and Fackenheim’s philosophy, he concedes that they have something in common, namely “the conviction that *human beings* are responsible for *tikkun*” (42).

According to Cooper, a political sense of *tikkun olam* can be traced back to the 1930s in Europe. The Polish and Czech publications he mentions weaponize the phrase for either a Zionist or an anti-Zionist position (15-16). There does not appear to be a direct influence of these cases on the increasing political use of *tikkun olam* in the last decades of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, Conservative Judaism was one of the first to champion the slogan, e.g. when its youth movement attached the term to its charity program (Cooper 17; see also Rosenthal 238).

However, the phrase *tikkun olam* only gained widespread popularity with the magazine *Tikkun*, which was founded in 1986 by the progressive activist and later rabbi Michael Lerner. When the magazine first came out, it still had to explain on its back cover that the title was derived from the injunction “to heal, repair and transform the world,” adding “All the rest is commentary” (Berger). This was an

allusion to Hillel's famous story from the Babylonian Talmud in which he summarizes the entire Torah with the Golden Rule, remarking "All the rest is commentary" (Danan 10).

At the same time, the magazine *Tikkun* meant this as a gibe at *Commentary*, one of the most important Jewish-American periodicals, from which *Tikkun* wanted to set itself apart (Berger; Danan 10). *Commentary* magazine had moved to the political right under the aegis of Norman Podhoretz and now prided itself to be a flagship of neoconservatism. In his founding editorial statement, Lerner fiercely attacked *Commentary* and its editor and laid out the progressive politics of his own publication. At the same time, he also emphasized the Jewish religious aspect of his endeavor: "Tikkun olam—the healing, repairing, and transforming of the world, is not only about politics, it is also about our spiritual and emotional lives, and our relationship to God" (Lerner 1986:6, qtd. in Kornfeld 68). It must have been astonishing to read that the concept of *tikkun olam*, which was firmly rooted in the religious sphere, was now being characterized as "not only about politics." What the author of the programmatic texts certainly did not attempt was a connection to the most important spiritual tradition of *tikkun olam*, the Kabbalah. Fine explains: "Michael Lerner's original editorial statement in *TIKKUN* makes absolutely no mention of and betrays no interest in the kabbalistic tradition which is the source of his journal's name" (51). On the cover pages of the most recent issues of the magazine, all sorts of 'woke' subjects serve as titles of the lead stories, "Beyond Patriarchy" (Winter 2019), "Decolonization" (Spring/Summer 2019), and "Re-Envisioning Socialism" (Spring/Summer 2020) among them.

An Intensifying Controversy

The *Google Ngram Viewer* illustrates the steep rise of the use of *tikkun olam* in American English since the 1980s; before that, the term was virtually non-existent. Since the beginning of this upsurge, there have been discussions about the relationship between the meaning of *tikkun olam* in classical Jewish religious writing and recent political usage. Fine already addressed the tension between the old and new semantics in his aforementioned 1989 article, drawing a comparison between Luria's mystical system and the contemporary meaning: "This conception [Luria's] thus bears little similarity to the kind of 'mending' which most contemporary exponents of *tikkun* have in mind. For the latter, *tikkun* is a byword for social, moral, or political activism of one sort or another" (52). After copiously illustrating this point, the essay may surprise readers when it claims that there are nevertheless "important resemblances between Lurianic theology and contemporary thought" (52). Apart from insisting on human responsibility in either sense of the phrase, Fine does not convincingly substantiate this claim.

Other reactions were less accommodating. Remarkably, Arnold Jacob Wolf, Reform rabbi and champion of liberal causes, came down particularly hard on *tikkun olam* in 2001. He attributes a distorted understanding of *tikkun olam* to complacency and hypocrisy, which he detects in the liberal Jewish-American community:

All this begins, I believe, with distorting *tikkun olam*. A teaching about compromise, sharpening, trimming and humanizing rabbinic law, a mystical doctrine about putting God's world back together again, this strange and half-understood notion becomes a huge umbrella under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain. (Wolf 482)

Wolf combines an examination of the fuzziness of the term with his criticism of a perceived lack of religious seriousness among much of American Jewry.

The *Forward's* language column "Philologos" devoted an installment to *tikkun olam* in 2003 and called the phrase "an example of how authentic religious concepts can be cheapened when retooled and promoted for a mass audience" (Philologos). As it later turned out, Hillel Halkin was the pseudonymous author of the column.

In 2008, Halkin followed up on his analysis in a piece for *Commentary* on "How Not to Heal the World." In this, Halkin is also concerned with the question of whether the current meaning of *tikkun olam* can be derived from the Jewish religion. The decisive point for him, however, is that in the Jewish tradition, there are two major directions related to the semantics of the phrase, a prophetic (messianic-universalistic) meaning primarily associated with the Aleinu prayer and a non-prophetic, practical (anti-messianic, particularistic) meaning primarily associated with the Talmud and classical rabbinic Judaism. The kabbalistic idea partakes of both strands.

Halkin's criticism is directed at the manipulative use of the term *tikkun olam* for universalist political purposes. While he also castigates the messianic Israeli settler movement, his principal target is the Jewish left. More specifically, he takes a swipe at the volume *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (ed. Or N. Rose et al. 2008), in which Jewish intellectuals and activists on the political left frequently use the term *tikkun olam* to present their political goals: "Health care, labor unions, public-school education, feminism, abortion rights, gay marriage, globalization, U.S. foreign policy, Darfur: on everything Judaism has a position—and, wondrously, this position just happens to coincide with that of the American liberal Left." The ironic tone of this paragraph then gives way to a more scathing attack on those American Jews who allegedly want to make Judaism conform to their own preconceived ideas.

Byron Sherwin, rabbi of Conservative Judaism and a mentee of Abraham Joshua Heschel's, also has a harsh verdict in store for *tikkun olam* in a 2013 article:

The contemporary use of *tikkun olam* is an example of the semantic displacement of American Jewry, an expression of verbal abuse. . . . The promiscuous use of the term identifies it with an enormous range of social programs, artistic projects, and a plethora of political causes. However, it is, in effect, little but a Jewish counterpart to Christian “liberation theology,” albeit without the theology, thereby appealing to the largely secular nature of American Jewry. (Sherwin 54)

It is hard to comprehend why Sherwin projects the idea of a “semantic displacement” of *tikkun olam*, which apparently points to diachronic linguistic change in the first place, to the Jewish community itself. He obviously places some blame on *tikkun olam* for what he identifies as the inability to distinguish between authentic Jewish values and acquired non-Jewish ideologies (44). Sherwin particularly censures an unspecific universalistic ethos that has allegedly taken hold of American Jewry. According to the rabbi, the current use of the slogan is not only indicative of Christian influence but of a general tendency towards secularism.

To bolster his dismissive position towards the concept, the author, on the last page of his piece, evokes the authority of Abraham Joshua Heschel. When Sherwin observes that Heschel, who was “no stranger to social action” (55), did not use the phrase *tikkun olam*, it is not surprising, though, as the term was hardly in circulation during Heschel’s lifetime (1907-1972). What Sherwin particularly argues is that Heschel drew upon authentic Jewish sources and criticized the distortion of Judaism. It should be noted that in contrast to Sherwin, others, Michael Lerner among them, have associated Heschel’s legacy with *tikkun olam* (Krasner, “The Place” 79).

The debate over *tikkun olam* attained new intensity in 2018 with the publication of Jonathan Neumann’s book *To Heal the World? How the Jewish Left Corrupts Judaism and Endangers Israel*. Neumann is religiously Orthodox and politically conservative. Not focusing exclusively on the phrase *tikkun olam*, the book asks more generally how the connection between American Jewry and the “social justice” movement developed. By choosing Isaac Mayer Wise, probably the most influential American Reform rabbi in the nineteenth century, as the starting point for his reflections, Neumann zeros in on the role of the Reform movement in what he sees as the discontent of American Judaism. Today’s obsession with *tikkun olam*, he argues, is an outgrowth of a universalist political ideology that contradicts traditional Judaism: “Tikkun olam is a huge deal in contemporary American Judaism – but there’s no basis for that in traditional Jewish thought” (Neumann 149). Moreover, according to Neumann, the rejection of Jewish particularism in favor of diffuse fantasies of world salvation comes at the expense of Israel – according to the formula “the stronger your commitment to *tikkun olam*, the weaker your Zionism and support for Israel” (195).

Neumann's book prompted a great number of reviews and articles in Jewish-American magazines and newspapers. While Michael Weingrad's review in the (neo)conservative online magazine *Mosaic* embraces Neumann's effort to reveal the weaknesses of "American tikkun-olam Judaism," there was considerable pushback from scholars and activists on the political left shortly after the publication of the book. Shaul Magid questions Neumann's credentials and scholarly methods in an article in *Tablet* in June 2018. He also takes exception to Neumann's assessment that the contemporary meaning of *tikkun olam* is not grounded in Jewish tradition, which should not be conceived as immutable anyway. Steve Lipman, writing in the *New York Jewish Week* in August of the same year, appreciates that resistance has formed against Neumann's "war on tikkun olam." David Seidenberg's article in the *Jewish Journal*, published only in February 2019, already looks back at the camps that have formed with respect to Neumann's book, "with conservatives praising it and liberals dismissing it." His contribution sets out to add a new wrinkle to the debate, arguing that *tikkun olam* in the sense of economic justice is not an American invention, but goes back to nineteenth-century progressive Zionism or even further.

Although the headline in the *Forward* article "Why the Orthodox Hate 'Tikkun Olam'" may suggest that the fault line runs between Orthodoxy and Reform, its author Ysoscher Katz, himself a rabbi of a Modern Orthodox congregation in Brooklyn, does not fully agree with Neumann: yes, many Orthodox Jews perceive the use of *tikkun olam* for progressive political purposes as 'cultural appropriation,' the supposed dichotomy presented by Neumann between universalism here, and love for the people and the land of Israel there is, however, misleading.

A highlight of the controversy was a two-hour debate titled "Tikkun Olam - Jewish Ideal or Left-Wing Idol," which took place at Ner Yisrael Synagogue in London in February 2020 and was held between Jonathan Neumann and Joe Wolfson, Orthodox campus rabbi at New York University (NYU). The event, which was broadcast by J-TV, can be understood as an intra-Orthodox debate but one that was nevertheless marked by major differences of opinion. Of course, the central issue was again whether *tikkun olam* constitutes an authentic Jewish concept. Neumann holds fast to his view that *tikkun olam* has nothing to do with Judaism and even does it great harm. Wolfson counters: while he does not use the term for "social justice," we should keep in mind that there are many Jewish concepts – *gemilut khasadim* ('the performance of kindness'), *tzedakah* ('charity to achieve justice'),³ *kiddush HaShem* ('sanctification of the Name'), etc. – that emphasize the responsibility of the individual towards the community and the world, even if they have not been called *tikkun olam* traditionally:

³ For a semantic distinction between *gemilut khasadim* and *tzedakah* see Robinson 237-40.

If you are going to ignore this family of concepts which tell us that fundamental to our existence as Jews is an obsession with looking for where there is pain and hurt in the world and thinking about how we can act to improve that pain, if you are going to ignore that, you are doing great violence to our mesorah.⁴ (“Debate” 27:30-28:00)

Evidently, Wolfson is primarily concerned with the ideas that govern Judaism, while Neumann starts out with the term *tikkun olam*, juxtaposing its traditional and recent meanings. Put differently, Wolfson’s reasoning follows an onomasiological path, Neumann’s a semasiological one. Much of the broader controversy over *tikkun olam* can be characterized according to this distinction.

Wolfson concedes to his interlocutor that the appropriation of the term by the political left is not unproblematic. At the same time, the rabbi condemns attempts by the political right to pass off their conservative beliefs as being mandated by the Jewish tradition. Some of his anger is directed at Ben Shapiro, who endorsed Neumann’s book on its back cover, for reducing the complexity of the Jewish stance on abortion to an unequivocal, quasi-Catholic pro-life position (“Debate” 31:50-32:30).

***Tikkun Olam* and the Study of Jewish Secularity**

The final part of this chapter is concerned with methodological problems regarding a detached, scholarly study of *tikkun olam* as part of Jewish-American culture. I am particularly interested in the question of whether the notion of Jewish secularity can be fruitfully applied to the phenomenon and what this case reveals about theoretical challenges in the research on Jewish secularity in general. The debate about *tikkun olam* throws the difficulties involved in the study of Jewish secularity into sharp relief.

The term *secular* sometimes appears in articles on *tikkun olam* (e.g. Krasner, “The Place” 83; Rosenthal 239). Sherwin is particularly outspoken in his verdict that the current meaning of the catchphrase is an expression of a secular mindset (46, 47, 53, 54). Even where critics of the slogan do not use the word *secular* explicitly, the idea that the modern meaning of *tikkun olam* is unmoored from the Jewish religion is often part of their judgment. As has been shown, some Jewish-American authorities will defend *tikkun olam* with its modern semantics as an expression of a Jewish religious ethos. From a disinterested point of view, where do we draw the line between religion and secularism? For an outside observer, it is obviously not possible to adopt any of these assessments unreservedly. Moreover, some Jewish dignitaries use the term *secular* mostly as a pejorative to castigate

⁴ The term *mesorah* denotes the chain or bond of Jewish traditions.

those who have allegedly left the fold. How can we have recourse to the term without negative connotations in an academic analysis that takes an external position on the debate about *tikkun olam*?

According to the sociologist of Jewish demographics Barry A. Kosmin, “[t]here is no more consensus over who is secular and what constitutes Jewish secularism than there is as to ‘who is a Jew?’ in terms of a religious category “ (77). At the same time, the classification of a person as either secular or religious may be achieved more easily than the classification of activities that are performed under the banner of *tikkun olam*. One can use surveys and other established methods of empirical social research to distinguish between religious and secular populations, but these hardly extend to political action. I would usually identify routing for Bernie Sanders, campaigning for LGBTQ policies, or joining a Black Lives Matter rally as secular efforts. Do they become religious by having a Hebrew slogan attached to them? Are they religious if the activists see themselves as animated by Jewish ideals, however distorted they may or may not be? Is it methodologically possible to distinguish between activities by Jews who adhere to the Jewish faith and those who merely seek a connection to the Jewish community via *tikkun olam* as ‘social action’? Should we understand the use of this slogan among leftist activists as “cultural appropriation” or “misappropriation,” as was suggested in Ysoscher Katz’s article? Or should we simply accept that a Hebrew expression serves as a link between secular and religious Jews, even though large parts of Orthodoxy are left out?

It should also be asked to what extent some critics of *tikkun olam* have recourse to the argument of the secular nature of *tikkun olam* to steer the conversation away from politics. In other words, could it be that attacks on the religious insignificance of the concept are a substitute for the rejection of the political positions involved? Is it even possible to disentangle the religious and political aspects of the debate?

The very use of the Hebrew term by left-wing Jews as well as the reasoning adopted in the controversy about the concept show that the Jewish religious tradition continues to serve as a principal reference point, irrespective of religious persuasions. Jewish identity appears to demand a feeling of continuity, historical lineage, and a connection with the past, even where Jewish existence is seen as highly mutable and adaptable. At the same time, *tikkun olam* is an expression of hope for the future, be it in its eschatological or more mundane varieties. It also stands for a sense of purpose and historical responsibility connecting religious Judaism and Jewish secularity.

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