



TIKUN OLAM - MENDING THE WORLD

Jewish leaders tend to seize on slogans - sometimes negative ones like antisemitism and assimilation - that pinpoint problems, sometimes positive ones like survival and revival that call for commitment and constructive effort.

One of the most common phrases in the second category is TIKUN OLAM, "mending the world".

Emil Fackenheim used it as a title for one of his books. Jonathan Sacks did the same thing, calling the book "To Heal a Fractured World". Both books imply that there are great gaps and massive defects in contemporary society, and "Tikun Olam" is the Jewish buzz-word for what to do about them.

It's an exciting, colourful phrase but though it regularly hits the headlines it is neither old nor new. In the Mishna (Gittin ch. 4) it indicated a set of legal enactments designed to make the world function well. Rambam broadened the notion into a combination of Torah study and observance that enhanced the quality

of society (Avot 1:2).

In the sense in which Fackenheim and Sacks and many others use the phrase it is not novel but is an interpretation of a key phrase in ALEINU, L'TAKEIN OLAM B'MALCHUT SHAD-DAI, the obligation to build the world into God's Kingdom. In the Aleinu sense it does not speak of repairing defects but of establishing order.

The idea of mending derives from Jewish mysticism, which argued that soon after Creation, "the vessels were shattered" and fragments went everywhere. Man's historic task was to rediscover, recapture and reconnect the broken shards. The way of achieving this is social action which works on those parts of the world which are broken.

This gives us two ways of understanding "Tikun Olam". I believe there is a third, suggested by the Chassidic story of a cobbler who was still at work at night when his candle was almost out, and he said, "There is still time for more mending."

What the story tells us is that "Olam" is not just the world around us but the personal world of the individual. Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity of transforming "Tikun Olam" into the personal task of attending to the

defects in ourselves, and whilst the day lasts there is still time for mending. **OZ**