TIKKUN OLAM:
BETWEEN UTOPIAN IDEA AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL PROCESS*

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Few ideas have boosted human thought and imagination as that of tikkun olam (repairing the world). Reformers have been leaving their mark since the dawn of human history, some crowned with a halo of sanctity and some condemned for their evil deeds. Prima facie, tikkun olam is a sublime notion expressing key features of human existence. The leading one is freedom. The amendment of reality necessarily assumes the ability to transcend factuality and be free to shape the world. Tikkun olam attests also to human creativity—we envisage how the world should be. Human beings are free creatures, capable of transcending their actual being and pursuing the possible, anticipated through imagination.

The fate of the tikkun olam idea, however, resembles that of many other sublime notions that are part of the general consensus—too little is invested in a critical effort that rigorously examines their nature. What do we intend when we speak of repairing the world? Is this a substantive idea, or do its inherent drawbacks deprive it of any justification? These are the central questions of this chapter.

My starting point is a distinction between two different and unrelated meanings of the concept of tikkun olam: (1) Tikkun olam as a utopian idea. (2) Tikkun olam as a concrete historical process unfolding in a concrete society. My central claim is that the first meaning of the concept is extremely problematic. We can still endorse the second meaning, however, because the concrete process of amending the world does not depend on the idea that directs it. The first step in the understanding of these claims and their implications, then, is to clarify the first meaning of tikkun olam.

Tikkun Olam as a Utopian Idea

According to this meaning of the term, tikkun olam is the realization of a specific idea that outlines the ideal vision. This perception assumes a

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contrast between real and ideal—the ideal negates actual reality and proposes to replace it with a utopian idea of the organization of the world. A critical discussion of all the aspects related to utopian thought exceeds the scope of this chapter, and the following discussion will be confined to specific aspects necessary for clarifying the meaning of tikkan olam.

Martin Buber defines utopia as “something not actually present but only represented. The utopian picture is a picture of what ‘should be.’ What is at work here is the longing for that rightness.” Implicit in this definition is an essential characteristic of utopian thought, which Karl Mannheim analyzes in detail in his celebrated work Ideology and Utopia. Mannheim emphasizes that utopia works in human thought in two complementary and opposite directions. First, human thought transcends the reality in which the utopia is born, rejects it, and offers an alternative model of existence in its place. In Buber’s terms, utopia places what “should be,” which is opposed to what is. Second, utopian thought strives to return to reality in order to rebuild it. Mannheim rightfully emphasizes that transcendence alone is not utopia. Transcendence becomes a constitutive element of utopia only if joined by a passion to shape reality in light of the idea.

What are the structural elements present in every utopia? First, the idea of repairing the world rests on the notion of a perfect world. This perfection is related to the relationship between the components of the world on the one hand, and to the standing of each component on the other. The ideal world is an ordered world whose components are in perfect mutual harmony, while each one is also perfect in itself. In Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s terms, the ideal world is the best of all possible worlds, which utopia counterposes to the real and imperfect one.

Second, since this world is ideal, it is harmonious—because it is more perfect than a non-harmonious world—and total—because it leaves no room for other options. Legitimizing another alternative as worthy means that the assumed perfection is not absolute because other and no less perfect options are also available.

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1 On this issue, see Shyli Karin-Frank, Utopia Reconsidered (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986).
4 For an extensive discussion, see Karin-Frank, Utopia Reconsidered, 37–40. See also Isaiah Berlin, The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas (London: John Murray, 1990), 20–23.
5 See also Frances Theresa Russell, Touring Utopia (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 45, and Karin-Frank, Utopia Reconsidered, 40.