**Challenges of a Rabbi in Postmodernity**

It was many years ago that a concept first entered my mind. After some time, I realized that it was central to Judaism: the concept of Tikkun Olam, which literally means *“the betterment of the world.”*

Even though this term does not appear in the Tanach, its meaning is present in the Bible in practically every pasuk, in each of its verses, and is the leitmotif in which the prophets derive their power.

The term Tikkun Olam first appears at the end of the 2nd century in the Mishna in the tractates of Gittin and Eduyot. Henceforth, this term has continued to be ever more important and appears with greater frequency in the works of Jewish thought, from the Talmud to modern thinkers.

I would like to share with you what the concept Tikkun Olam means to me.

I would like to tell you about the guiding principles, objectives, and ideas that will guide my rabbinical practice, and those which I hope you will see reflected in my everyday activities. The deepening of each one of the concepts briefly identified here forms part of the beautiful and challenging task that I am undertaking before you.

I do not pretend that everyone follows all of my ideas. A rabbi that everyone follows is one that always gets along with everyone and does not put their ideas at risk. A rabbi that nobody follows probably chose the wrong profession. Therefore, the sign of a good rabbi is when many people are following most of their ideas.

I believe that each one of us, from our own place, must contribute to Tikkun Olam. As Rabbi Tarfon says in Pirkei Avot: “lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v’lo atah ben horin l’hivatel mimena” = “You are not expected to complete the task, but neither are you free to avoid it.”

To me, as a rabbi, Tikkun Olam means to put God back in the center of our lives. He should not be replaced by the false deities of postmodernity, such as fame, power, money, ambition, and many others that we could name.

But we must bear in mind that religion was created for the good of man. Therefore, we should hold at the center of our lives not only God, but also the human being.

We must not deny our human nature in order to try to elevate ourselves to the divine world. At the same time, the Divine must also be lowered to the human. Our everyday life must be sanctified.

We must not simply wait for God or seek Him in the supernatural, neither must we limit ourselves to only seeking Him in books and prayers. Instead, we must invoke the Divine through our actions and seek Him primarily in our hearts. As the Prophet Amos teaches us, “Dirshuni vi-heyu” = “Seek Me and live.”

For this reason, I believe in God, but, above all, I believe and confide in the human being, despite our human flaws.

Just as God is a necessity to man, man is a necessity to God. That is why we need to recreate the dialogue between *me*, the human and *You*, the Divine, a dialogue that consists of becoming closer to God but without falling into fundamentalisms or religious fanaticisms. We must differentiate, as Rav Kook taught, between the reverential respect for God and the tradition of Israel (*Yirat Shamayim*); and *Yirat Ha-Machshava,* the fear of thought, of reflection, of questioning, of challenging. Many accept their destiny, only the wise determine it.

For me as an educator, Tikkun Olam means to understand and accept that we live in a world with more questions than answers. Paraphrasing Aristotle, a true master is not one that forces knowledge but rather one that awakens in their students a need to know. He or she is the one who, rather than giving answers, generates questions; for in the question and recognition of our ignorance begins the search for knowledge.

To be mediocre is to conceal one’s deficiencies, to be wise is to seek them out. I believe that all rabbis must strike a balance between personal wants and needs and those of the community. As Pythagoras teaches us, if you educate the children then it won't be necessary to punish the men.

That’s why it is not enough for a modern rabbi to know Halacha (Jewish Law). They must also be a teacher and an educator in the broadest sense. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake falls short of a commitment to reality. A rabbi must not solely stay inside their synagogue or Jewish institution, waiting for Jews to listen to their teachings or to follow their texts. A rabbi must also be concerned with making sure that their teachings actually speak to Jews.

Tikkun Olam means to understand that the continuity of our heritage does not only reside in adopting beliefs and practices, but in the continuous adaptation and re-adaptation of our heritage with each generation.

This adaptation must be completed through the synthesis of two philosophical Jewish responses to the phenomenon of modernity. On one hand, we have Mordecai Kaplan’s response, which consists of keeping symbols fixed and renewing their meanings. On the other hand, Harry Wolfson’s response proposes the opposite, to keep meanings fixed and to renew their symbols.

Both positions recognize that each custom is composed of two elements: a symbol and a meaning; but they differ between which of those two elements must be renewed and which must be kept fixed.

I believe that the desired adaptation of our heritage is achieved by using both positions and alternating between them. The starting principle to decide which position to take is in the determination of the Jewish origin of the respective custom. If there was an original Jewish symbol that had a meaning, then we must keep that symbol fixed and readapt its meaning, as is the case with tefillin, kashrut, and mezuzas. However, instead, if the origin of Jewish meaning generated a symbol that was ultimately adopted, then we must keep the existing meaning fixed and renew the symbol. For example, one can refer to the case of tzniut, or the principle of leading a modest life, as expressed through the use of a wig.

I am aware that this guideline of adaptation is not easy, that many times it is difficult to determine the origin of the symbol or the meaning. In other instances, if it is possible to determine the symbol or meaning, then it is reasonable to incorporate the possible consequences of this determination. This is one of the many challenges that all conservative rabbis must accept upon assuming this fascinating role.

Another challenge that the postmodern rabbi must face, as Professor Rosenak teaches us, is understanding that many times, two important and positive principles can come into conflict with each other. We must therefore try to strike a balance between them and not opt for one and reject the other.

Truth and responsibility are two such principles. Both are positive and important and, in many cases, come into conflict with each other. Not all of us, at any moment, context, or age, are prepared to understand and accept certain truths. That is why the educator must prioritize the responsibility. However, on the other hand, too much responsibility can lead us to obscurantism, or failing to transmit the culture itself. During the Middle Ages, in the face of this conflict, it was decided that people should cling to responsibility. We can see this in the texts of Maimonides and Yehuda Levi in Judaism, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas in Christianity, and Averroes in Islam. Later, in the modern age, as a reaction to medieval obscurantism, people opted for the truth. We can see this in the texts of Spinoza, Rosenzweig, and Herman Cohen.

Today, in postmodernity, I believe that we must not make a decisive choice. Instead, we must be able to strike a balance between truth and responsibility. Tikkun Olam means, as a Jew, to understand the centrality of the State of Israel to our lives. It is not to deny the importance of the diaspora. Here, too, we must make a dichotomous choice. Once again, however, we must strike a balance, as Abraham Yehoshua Heschel metaphorically expressed, “the people of Israel are like a tree, whose roots are in the Land of Israel and whose branches are in the diaspora.” A tree cannot blossom without roots, as in the State of Israel. However, neither can it bear fruit without branches, or without the diaspora.

Tikkun Olam is to live according to the Halacha, that is to say, the code of Jewish laws and customs. The Halacha is one of the most genuine ways our people chose to express their Judaism and their relationship with God and their neighbor. The development and interpretation of the Halacha must be governed by the process of searching for legal precedents in our historical sources. However, based on my understanding, through this process, we must add to it a *sine qua non* condition, or one of ethics and justice. The Halacha must not be taken as a body of law that is exclusively subject to and dependent on the Halachic procedure. Oftentimes, Halachic laws and procedures do not always equate to justice. The Halacha must always strive for ethics and justice and to never contradict them. Any development of the Halacha that does not comply with this condition should automatically be excluded from the Halachic system.

Tikkun Olam means not asking God to do that which human beings ought to do themselves. This is why we must be gentle with our neighbors, open our hearts to hearing the despairing cries of those who suffer, those who call for help. As Plato taught us, since we are human beings, nothing human should be alien to us.

The moment has come to stop talking and start acting, because the hungry do not hope for beautiful words from us, but rather for a plate of food; the freezing do not want us to provide good advice, but rather a warm embrace; the hurting do not want to listen to our speeches but are awaiting our care. Because what hurts us more than the blows of life themselves is the fact that it is fellow human beings striking us. It is clear that blows can teach, but so can pats on the back. Let’s keep in mind that the most generous one is not the one who gives the most, but the one who gives in the best way.

Tikkun Olam is, above all things, to learn to communicate by not only talking. It is the ability to express our sentiments by means of words or gazes. In other words, it is, more often than not, to say to your spouse “I adore you,” to your mother “I love you,” to your father “I need you.” It is also about hugging your sibling and meeting up with your friends, because in these small things lies the secret to happiness.

Tosefta Yevamot teaches us that “words are beautiful only when they are spoken by the mouth of someone who fulfills them.” For this reason, as the book of the City of God concludes, “whoever believes that I have said very little, or whoever believes that I have said too much, I ask them to forgive me. Whoever believes that I have said enough, join me in giving thanks to God,” and in being able to carry out this Tikkun Olam, this betterment of the world.