

## **Repairing the Broken Vessels of Light: Forging a Strategic Social Justice Future**

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“Vayehi or – And there was light.”<sup>1</sup> As the Creation of the World commenced, God took that holy light and filled vessels with it. God then sent those vessels around the world, so that they might make the world perfect. But the holy light was too powerful to be contained, and the vessels shattered open, dispersing sparks of divine light everywhere. Some of the sparks entered into the beings that God had created, and therefore, we humans were blessed with divine light. Other sparks became trapped in the shards of the broken vessels that became scattered across existence, lodging themselves in the very essence of our world. As the shards remain broken, so does our world and all within it.

Yet, hope is not lost. In fact, the task of reuniting the divine light is not God’s to perform, but firmly in our hands. Two steps must occur. First, the divine sparks within each person must be reawakened, and then, only when enough divine light is radiating will the broken shards of this world be gathered together and the vessels of holy light be restored as originally intended. As such, we will experience tikkun olam – the healing of the world.

Thus teaches Rabbi Isaac Luria and his school of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, which began the popularizing of the term “tikkun olam.”<sup>2</sup> This phrase has taken on numerous roles over the millennia and now it is an often-used term describing our reason to become involved in the needed social justice work that still plagues our community, society, and world. I might add my own two cents that the term “tikkun olam” over the most recent era of Jewish life has become overused, a catch-all term for any social action anytime anywhere. This is not bad or wrong, but misses much of the nuanced and powerful lessons originally from Isaac Luria.

Tikkun olam is not a Jewish way of justifying acts of social justice, as needed as they may be. Tikkun olam, at its essence, is about regaining the holy light at the core of our world through the connection of our own divine sparks and the broken shards around the world. Tikkun olam is most realized, not through the actions of the individual, the group, or even a social justice team, but through our ability to be in relationship, work together, and gather shared resources, wisdom, passions, and power to truly make the greatest effort to reignite and repair the vessels of divinity.

Temple Beth Am has been blessed with many passionate leaders and role models, both clergy and lay, who have spearheaded our long history of social justice, which have made positive impacts on many topics. We, today, must learn from them, and are inspired by them.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:3

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), known as The Ari, was a rabbi and mystic in Tzfat, Israel

We also grow from them and chart our own path. As we enter 5783, a year to focus on Creating Home Together, I ask what sort of synagogue we want to be as we engage in a community-wide strategic approach to social justice. Might I propose that we engage in the Lurianic description of “tikkun olam,” not a catch-all term for social justice activities, but one truly grounded in the work of relationships.

The relational quality of tikkun olam is quite similar to the tenets of modern-day community organizing. Both can serve as grounding inspiration for strategic social justice work, often asking us to look at our world, our role within community, and our approach in different ways. As taught by Rabbi Rachel Van Thyn, “Community organizing, too, has been around as long as there have been people acting collectively towards a common goal. However, [there was] room for change. Previously the focus had been on gathering individuals and building groups one person at a time. But real power to create change comes through people, groups, organizations, institutions, whole communities.”<sup>3</sup> We most succeed when we are most in relationship with each other, both within a community, such as a synagogue, and around a community, such as the many groups, organizations, non-profits, and more that work in a similar fashion. The best path to healing the world is by uniting, connecting, and working together, otherwise we remain broken, fragmented, and shattered.

Inspired by our history but also looking ahead, how will Temple Beth Am engage in this work? I offer three ways for our community to heal the shattered vessels of holiness through tzedek / justice for our collective future, to be the divine light, to shine brilliantly from the synagogue home we create together. Those three ways are: with focus, in partnership, and across our community.

The Talmud puts it succinctly, “If you try to do too much, you end up doing nothing.”<sup>4</sup> I will admit that it can be hard to look at the great many problems of our world and thinking we must be involved in it all, for how can we pick? At the same time, we know if we try to tackle too much, we are stretched too thin and ineffective. Even the most powerful light cannot shine everywhere at once. How can we apply this to our community? Even as we are a large congregation, we cannot successfully, effectively, diligently take on every issue that causes our heart to ache.

We do the most good when we strategically focus on a number of particular issues and engage in them with the fullness of our being, driving our people and our resources into the greatest impact. We, as a congregation, should together select the issues that we focus on. The tools of community organizing already show us the path for selection and group decisions, through listening campaigns and communal sharing. When we are united around a few issues, our own sparks of holiness join together in its own tikkun and we have greater motivation and support for each other. This asks a bit of humility from us as well; issues arise, important issues, but we cannot jump in full-heart and full-effort to every matter. Of course, we should adapt and adjust over the years, but thoughtfully and together. Let us

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Rachel Van Thyn, “Direct Service or Community Organizing?,” <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/direct-service-or-community-organizing/>

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 5b

dedicate ourselves to a few key issues and engage in them passionately where we can make the most sacred impact.

Even as we will collectively focus on a few issues, our world still aches. New issues arise and grab our attention. There is so much brokenness around. What should we do? The Midrash likens this to the time in the wilderness when Moses told the people to stop bringing goods and gifts to the Tabernacle. The people initially felt lost but then, says the Midrash, they found another solution. They took their holy gifts from the Tabernacle to the priesthood who warmly received them.<sup>5</sup> Their passion and desire to give to the community was not lost; it was redirected to another group who would benefit more. This act of generosity also awakens the divine spark within all, the people, Moses and the Tabernacle, and the priests.

As we know the focus and resources of our synagogue, we may seem to be abandoning so many of the other issues that plague our society. Instead of seeing ourselves as restricted, we look outside to the amazing bounty in other organizations, their leadership, their history, their work, and the partnership we can create together. Spreading ourselves thin fractures us further, and the light dims to point of having no impact. Instead, we can be in awe of and support of others. Temple Beth Am is already in partnership with numerous organizations including the Faith Action Network, Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, Seattle Church Council, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and many more. Let us cultivate, lean on, and grow our partnerships, so when an issue arises and another group is more deeply engaged, more resourced, and more knowledgeable, we follow them and be their aid as they dictate. We are living the true intention of community organizing when we share our power across organizations and let others lead. We are building relationships, which magnify the sparks of each person and organization, just as true tikkun olam intends us to.

Our strategy is coming into clarity. We will focus our efforts on a few communally-decided issues. We will partner with organizations who do sacred work on other needs within our society. Through these two approaches, we identify the broken shards, imbue them with holy light, and work to heal the world together. But as mentioned earlier, the shards are not the only places that the divine light was released to. Each person, each one of us, contains that holiness from Creation. A Chasidic teaching tells us that our divine spark is brighter and more radiant when we are in moments of connection with each other, in the most profound experiences between person-and-person, such as during honest teshuvah here on Yom Kippur.<sup>6</sup> When we appeal to each other, appreciating the flaws and the goodness in each other, we raise the sparks within.

This is where we harness the greatest blessing of all – the many amazing, inspirational people in our Temple Beth Am community. Rabbi Joel Mosbacher reminds us not to rely on a few individuals to do the work for the entire community, but all should be involved where we can, in the way appropriate to each of us.<sup>7</sup> There are so many ways, such as education,

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<sup>5</sup> Midrash Tanchuma on Pekudei 11:3

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, Likkutei Yekarim

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Rachel Van Thyn, “Direct Service or Community Organizing?,” <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/direct-service-or-community-organizing/>

volunteering, fundraising, political advocacy, and of course, helping to organize within and across community itself. For the greatest impact, awakening the most divine sparks, creating the most light to brighten this world, we need a shared approach. It is not about ego and who is in the charge and making the decisions, it is about us all joining together.

Like our Homeless 2 Renter program, who for two decades have helped those facing housing scarcity, I am similarly honored to hold up our Immigrant Justice Action Team is prime example of living this social justice strategy: a clear focus, steady partnerships, and engaging many within our community. This group is focused on the needs of the newest immigrants to our shores. They have been inspired by Jewish values and modern issues, and Beth Am members formed, organized, and evolved this group based on the needs of the community. They have partnered with numerous organizations, including Jewish Family Service, the International Rescue Committee, and the Jewish Coalition for Immigrant Justice Northwest.

I want to briefly highlight their current effort, especially as it relates to our third approach, engaging the full breadth of the Temple Beth Am community. In partnership with HIAS, Beth Am, led by our Immigrant Justice team, is committed to sponsoring and supporting a Ukrainian refugee family. We have convened a Welcome Circle who will be most directly working with this family, but our whole synagogue is needed.

The Immigrant Justice Team, my rabbinic colleagues and I sent an email about this initiative earlier this week. I implore all of you to bring your holy light to this crucial effort. The Action Team and Welcome Committee are also organizing this afternoon's Yom Kippur panel, which speaks about their current work and their larger sacred purpose. I encourage all of you to attend in person or online. Thank you for modeling our strategic, community organizing approach to social justice. And this is just one example of how we are blessed with here at Temple Beth Am.

We are embarking on 5783, Creating Home Together. Our world that has changed, grown, and learned so much in the past few years. Inspired by our history, we are grateful to embrace this social justice strategy: with focus, in partnership, and across our community. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, "The meaning of our life lies in our perfecting the universe / tikkun olam, which redeems the sparks of holiness scattered throughout the darkness of the world." Together, truly together, our own light brightens; the light of our community shines through; goodness, justice, and holiness radiate across the world; and then the broken vessels of divine light begin to heal.

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An adapted version of this was offered for a multi-generational community, with the following questions offered for conversation:

With focus: What topics keep you up at night?

In partnership: Where do you find those that help you the most?

Across our community: What skill or light do you bring into our community?