

Concept

Tikkun Olam

Definition

Literally meaning "repairing the world," Reut defines **Tikkun Olam as a core Jewish value that identifies with a particularly Jewish higher or greater responsibility and that has manifested in various ways throughout the course of Jewish civilization.**

Background

Evolving trends in Tikkun Olam, described below, have laid the ground for [Reut's 21st century Tikkun Olam initiative](#) to expand the global engagement of Israel and the Jewish people.

Jewish history can be seen as an ongoing conversation between the universal and particular, in which the uniqueness of the Jewish people, traditionally based on possession of the *Torah* and a special relationship with God, interacts with the broader rights and responsibilities towards humanity that these attributes entail.

As the Jewish people have adapted to a changing world, the concept of Tikkun Olam has taken on different forms and different names – in religious texts, in recent Jewish history, and in the history of the State of Israel.

Historical Review of Tikkun Olam in Jewish Civilization

The Term Tikkun Olam Came to Life in Religious Texts

Rabbi Jill Jacobs discusses primary usages of Tikkun Olam in texts:

- **The *Aleinu* prayer contains a promise** to "*l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*," referring to restoring God's ultimate sovereignty and interpreted as working towards the manifestation of divinity in every corner of the world.¹ *Aleinu*, which may have originated as early as second century CE and concludes each of the three daily Jewish prayer services, expresses a particularistic vision as a route to a universalistic calling.² Its first paragraph speaks of a specifically Jewish obligation to praise God and its second paragraph calls for universal recognition of God by all people;³
- **Midrashic⁴ calls to preserve the physical world**, born of a rabbinic desire to sustain the social order, promoted a more literal understanding of Tikkun Olam as the physical repair or stabilization of the world. The term Tikkun Olam appears

¹ See: Jill Jacobs, [The History of "Tikkun Olam."](#) *Zeek*, 06/07.

² See: Rabbi Asher Meir, [Meaning in Mitzvot](#), *OU/NCSY Israel Center*.

³ See: Seth Winberg, [Aleinu: A Popular Prayer with a Controversial History](#), *MyJewishLearning*.

⁴ Rabbinic elaborations of biblical text.

in ten separate places in the *Mishnah* – the first attempt to codify Jewish law. A common thread is the primary focus on protecting the person or set of people who typically found themselves at the bottom of the social order;⁵

- **The Lurianic belief highlights the power of the Jewish people to restore divine perfection.** Lurianic Kabbalah, a sixteenth-century mystical school that revolved around Rabbi Isaac Luria, introduced into Jewish thought the idea that human actions can have an effect on the cosmos. In this conception, Tikkun Olam is performing *mitzvot* in order to restore divine perfection to creation.⁶

Beyond the use of the term Tikkun Olam, religious texts provide a moral foundation for the role that Jews should play in the wider society. Concepts associated with Tikkun Olam in Jewish texts include financial support of the poor (*tzedakah*), acts of loving kindness (*g'milut hasidim*), and justice (*tzedek*). In addition, UK Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points to three pervasive themes emerging from the texts that speak to a unique Jewish role in universal contribution:

- **The gifts bestowed upon the Jewish people are a right and an obligation.** At the end of his life, Moses cautioned the Israelites that the *Torah* was not given for their use alone and emphasized the transformative powers of living as a Jewish people to influence other nations;
- **Changing the world is a destination of Jewish history.** Sacks frames Jewish history as a journey through three destinations according to God's promises to Abraham: The destination of Jewish land, the destination of Jewish children, and the destination of changing the world. In this third promise, '*nivrichu b'cha kol mispachot ha'adama*,' Abraham is promised that "through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed";
- **The Jewish people's journey is to transform into a people to transform the world.** The *Torah* is a book about the Jewish people that for the first eleven chapters talks about humanity as a whole.⁷

Jewish Empowerment Unleashed a Renewed Tikkun Olam Paradigm

The 19th century saw a renewal of Jewish movements coalesced around a **Tikkun Olam narrative**. In much of the Jewish people's 2000 years as a Diaspora, Tikkun Olam focused inwardly, reflecting the powerlessness of Jewish communities fighting pariah status to engage outside of their communities.⁸ However, during the Jewish Enlightenment (approximately 1770s-1880s),⁹ some Jewish communities began to adopt

⁵ See: Jill Jacobs, [The History of "Tikkun Olam," Zeek](#), 06/07.

⁶ See: Jill Jacobs, [The History of "Tikkun Olam," Zeek](#), 06/07.

⁷ See: **Genesis** 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14 and Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Tikkun Olam: Orthodoxy's Responsibility to Perfect GOD's World](#), **Orthodox Union Institute for Public Affairs**, 12/97.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "[the] Enlightenment,' [is] the movement which originated in eighteenth-century Germany with the aim of broadening the intellectual and social horizons of the Jews to enable them to take their

views of human culture as universal, alongside a sense of Jewish mission and destiny.¹⁰ In this period, phrases such as "light unto nations," "the Jewish mission," and "ethical universalism" gained currency in the context of Tikkun Olam.¹¹

Beginning in the 1950s, Jewish communities in North America began using the concept and logic of Tikkun Olam to express their Jewish service values. Today, the term and related activities are perceived as a core Jewish value and a hallmark of liberal, progressive Judaism.

By the 1970s, the Tikkun Olam call had been adopted by a spectrum of Jewish movements. The term became popularized primarily in the United States beginning with the era of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. It continued to gain popularity in the 1970s and 1980s in progressive Jewish circles, which increasingly sought separation from the traditional Jewish institutions, and within the Conservative Movement in the United States, which named its youth program in social justice 'Tikkun Olam' in 1970 and incorporated the term into its statement of principles in 1988.¹² In 1979, a progressive Jewish group, the New Jewish Agenda, began promoting the idea of Tikkun Olam within their constituency¹³ and in 1986 the leftist Jewish magazine *Tikkun* published its first issue, further expanding the usage of the term in the modern American Jewish lexicon.

Tikkun Olam was a Cornerstone of the Zionist Vision

The concept of Tikkun Olam was a central tenet in Zionist thought. In 1902 Theodore Herzl wrote in *Altneuland*, a founding document of modern political Zionism, that, "once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans."

Early Israeli founding leaders made assisting developing-world countries a central priority. Specifically, former Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir wrote extensively on the issue, with Ben-Gurion discussing assistance as a "great historic privilege, which is also a duty, of...helping to solve the gravest problem of the 20th century – the central problem of all humanity in our time." Meir explained that Israel's foreign assistance program "typifies the drive towards social justice, reconstruction and rehabilitation that is at the very heart of Labor-Zionism – and Judaism" and is "a continuation of our own most valued traditions and an expression of our own deepest historical instincts."¹⁴

place in Western society." Its partisans were known as *maskilim*. See: Rabbi Louis Jacob, [Haskalah](#), [MyJewishLearning](#).

¹⁰ See: Immanuel Etkes, [Haskalah](#), [The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe](#).

¹¹ See: Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Tikkun Olam: Orthodoxy's Responsibility to Perfect God's World](#), [Orthodox Union Institute for Public Affairs](#), 12/97.

¹² See: How [Tikkun Olam Got its Groove](#), [Moment Magazine](#), May/June 2010.

¹³ See: Lawrence Fine, [Tikkun Olam in Contemporary Jewish Thought](#), [myjewishlearning.com](#), accessed September 20, 2011.

¹⁴ See: Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), [The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy](#), 07/09.

The Early Years (1957-1973): Israel Stands Out in Foreign Assistance

Israel established the Center for Cooperation of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (known by the Hebrew-language acronym as MASHAV) **as a part of its foreign ministry in 1958.** During its first ten years, Israel's development cooperation program trained more than 10,000 individuals from over 90 countries, and sent more than 4,000 technical assistants to 62 countries.¹⁵ Its budget, relative to the size of Israel's economy, was comparable to that of the major, developed-country donors of the time. Israel's contribution received international recognition¹⁶ and precipitated extensive international cooperation.¹⁷

Israel's foreign assistance program attracted domestic political and public support, yielding cooperation across a range of government agencies, institutions, and professional associations:¹⁸ for example, Israel's labor union (the *Histadrut*) created an Afro-Asian Training Institute, with support from the American AFL-CIO, in 1960. The overriding ethos was a sense of solidarity with the liberation struggles of emerging states.

The Decline (1973-present): Marginal and Sidelined

The Arab boycott precipitated a steep decline in Israel's foreign assistance. Following the October 1973 War, all but four African countries severed relations with Israel. An immediate 50 percent decline in MASHAV's operational budget followed, along with a dramatic drop in political and public support for Israel's foreign assistance program within two years.

Israeli foreign assistance budget has continued to decline,¹⁹ with recent budgets half of what they were in 1999. Since 2000, they have ranged from 0.03% to 0.07% of

¹⁵ By 1964, the Israeli ratio of experts to total population was twice that of the OECD-DAC average. See: Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), **The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy**, 07/09.

¹⁶ Contemporary professional literature and donor organization/United Nations reports praised Israel's efforts in development spheres, which also garnered coverage in mainstream media. For example, in a 1962 article in *The Guardian*: "Israel's policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa... should be recognized to be not just part of its defense line against the Arab world, but also of a genuine desire to help. Africans respond because they recognize this." See: Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), **The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy**, 07/09.

¹⁷ More than half of MASHAV's programs during its first decade of activity were financed by non-Israeli sources. Israel signed cooperation agreements with UN agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, UNCTAD, UNESCO, and FAO, and with donor countries, including the U.S., Holland, Germany, and Denmark. Arye Oded, Fifty Years of MASHAV Activity, [Jewish Political Studies Review](#), **Issue 21:3-4**, Fall 2009 and Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), **The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy**, 07/09.

¹⁸ These included government ministries, government-funded research institutions, medical institutions, and associations of engineers and architects. Arye Oded, Fifty Years of MASHAV Activity, [Jewish Political Studies Review](#), **Issue 21:3-4**, Fall 2009.

¹⁹ The exception is a brief resurgence ushered in by the fall of the Soviet Union and progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict, followed by a precipitous drop against the backdrop of a stalled Israeli-

the Gross National Income (GNI); at the lowest point, approximately one-tenth of the percentage allocated in the 1960s and less than one-quarter of the percentage allocated on average for foreign assistance by OECD donor nations.²⁰

Trends in the Jewish World and Israel Today

Burgeoning Jewish World Involvement in Social Service

Today, Tikkun Olam has become increasingly mainstream in Jewish communities, especially in North America. Nevertheless it carries different meanings for various communities including fighting poverty and insecurity, performing community service, volunteering internationally, raising money for Israel, and teaching *Torah*.²¹ In the last several years the term has entered into American society and popular culture, in movies and in even in speeches by Barack Obama and Cornel West.²²

Skyrocketing Jewish philanthropic leadership in recent years demonstrates the prominence of Tikkun Olam values. A 2007 study found that charitable foundations founded by Jews exist in disproportionate numbers among American philanthropists. While few Jewish foundations existed before the 1970s, by 2007 there were 45 that each gave out more than \$3,000,000. In 2011, 76 percent (\$1.05 billion) of the \$1.4 billion dollars donated by private foundations established by Jews went to secular organizations.²³

At the same time, there has been a marked increase of participation in volunteer service projects of 20% per year



Exemplifying the potential for Israeli strengths to significantly impact vulnerable global populations, Israel has achieved the world's highest rate of water efficiency and Israeli cows have the world's highest milk yields. Source: [Israel: Global Center for Breakthrough Innovation](#), Israel Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Labor; image courtesy of [Israel Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development](#)

Palestinian peace process in 2000. Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy, 07/09.

²⁰ According to the OECD Development Assistance Committee, in 2010 Israeli foreign assistance as a percentage of GNI was 0.07%, as compared to the OECD/DAC average of 0.32%, with a high of 1.10% from Norway and a low of 0.15% from Italy. Even more striking, the 0.7% that Israel gives includes funds for immigrant absorption, defense, homeland security, and part of the Water Authority budget. Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy, 07/09.

²¹ See: Jill Jacobs, [The History of "Tikkun Olam," Zeek](#), 06/07.

²² See: How [Tikkun Olam Got its Groove](#), *Moment Magazine*, May/June 2010 and Avraham Infeld, [Obama's 'tikkun olam': Lost in Translation?](#), The Times of Israel, 3/10/12.

²³ See: Gary A. Tobin and Aryeh Weinbergh, [A Study of Jewish Foundations](#), Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2007 and Erik Ludwig and Aryeh Weinberg, [Following the Money: A Look at Jewish Foundation Giving](#), Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2012.

for five years through 2007.²⁴ A 2010 survey of Jewish young adults found that more than 70% of respondents had volunteered in the previous 12 months.²⁵

Israeli Academic, Civil Society, and Private Sector Interest in Global Tikkun Olam Activities

The unique conditions that Israel has faced in transitioning to developed-country status have promoted innovations with broad applicability to challenges faced in the developing world. Israel has established itself as a ‘start-up nation’ and a world leader in creatively dealing with some of the greatest challenges facing humanity in fields such as medicine, communications, large-scale immigration, homeland security, and society building.²⁶

Perhaps the most illustrative example of relevant Israeli expertise stems from the Israeli experience in providing for a population in conditions of water scarcity and desert climates. Associated challenges have spawned vigorous Israeli private sector activity in collaboration with government support,²⁷ with more than 400 Israeli companies focusing on these issues.²⁸

- **Water management:** Israel is a world leader in desalinization and wastewater treatment, which accounts for nearly 75% of agricultural consumption. In total, exports from the sector have doubled between 2006-2009,²⁹ reaching \$1.5 billion in 2010.³⁰ The Israeli water management sector consists of approximately 200 world class companies involved in desalination, recycling of waste water, water safety, and infotech solutions to improve planning and forecasting abilities.
- **Agricultural technology:** Israel developed a vibrant agriculture sector that enabled Israeli self-sufficiency in agricultural production. Israel invented drip irrigation and has made significant advances in saline water irrigation, greenhouse technologies, dairy production, seed development, bio-organic agriculture, crop protection, aquaculture, and desert agriculture.³¹
- **Renewable energy:** In 2011 Israel landed eight companies in the Cleantech top 100 (four companies operating within Israel and four founded by Israelis, based in

²⁴ See: Shifra Bronznick, and Didi Goldenhar, Visioning Justice and the American Jewish Community, **Nathan Cummings Foundation**, 2008.

²⁵ See: Fern Chertock, et. al, [Volunteering and Values](#): A **Repair the World** Report on Jewish Young Adults, 06/11.

²⁶ For case studies of areas of Israeli and Jewish world expertise with relevance to developing world challenges, see our analysis on [strategic technical areas of focus](#).

²⁷ On the critical nature of these issues, see: [Food Security and Climate Change: Challenges to 2050 and Beyond](#), IFPRI Issue Brief 66, **International Food Policy Research Institute Web site**, 12/10. For more information on Israeli innovation in these fields, see: [Israel: Global Center for Breakthrough Innovation](#), Israel Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Labor, **Investment Promotion Center Web site**.

²⁸ See: [Israel NewTech Web site](#).

²⁹ See: [WATEC Israel 2011 Web site](#).

³⁰ See: Yuval Azulai, [Israel looks to export water tech to world's mines](#), **Globes**, 12/27/10.

³¹ See: [The Israel Project Agrotech Kit](#) on their web site.

the United States).³² Among its areas of expertise, Israel develops solar and geothermal technology, energy from waste, biofuel, and energy efficiency technologies.³³

An outcropping of civil society organizations and academic institutions within Israel promoting international humanitarian assistance and development have emerged in the last decade.³⁴ They may mark the beginning of a growing wave to help Israel reclaim the globally directed Tikkun Olam ethos embodied by Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir.

The Government of Israel's Foreign Assistance Today

Even with growing momentum in globally directed Tikkun Olam initiatives, political and public support for robust Israeli foreign assistance is meager. Members of Israel's parliament (the *Knesset*) have three times failed to pass an international aid bill, each time unable even to garner sufficient support to bring the bill to a vote. Public opinion is similarly unfavorable, with only 21% of respondents in a 2008 public opinion poll in support of raising Israel's level of development assistance.³⁵

Nevertheless, Israel has been moving toward increased engagement in international development. For example, in February of 2012 Israel became a member of the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Program, becoming one of 36 nations that helps determine programming of the UNDP's \$1 billion annual budget.³⁶

Despite a modest budget, MASHAV has succeeded in reaching many individuals in the developing world. In 2010, MASHAV trained more than 2,400 participants in Israel from 97 countries and nearly 4,000 participants in 76 countries abroad. MASHAV has signed memoranda of understanding and other bilateral agreements with numerous national and multilateral organizations to support development assistance in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

³² See: David Shear, [8 Israeli companies win cleantech awards](#), *Ynet*, 11/11, and the list of the [Global Cleantech 100](#) on the [Cleantech Group Web site](#).

³³ See: [Israel: Global Center for Breakthrough Innovation](#), Israel Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Labor, [Investment Promotion Center Web site](#).

³⁴ These include organizations such as [Brit Olam](#), [Israaid](#), and [Tevel B'Tzedek](#), which implement foreign assistance projects abroad, and academic programs, such as [the Glocal Program](#) at Hebrew University, [the Africa Centre](#) at Ben-Gurion University, the forthcoming food security masters degree at Tel Aviv University, and others that are introducing international development issues into academic discourse and curricula.

³⁵ In this poll, only 56% of Israelis believed Israel should provide assistance to developing countries at all, and 44% responded that Israel should only provide assistance in an emergency or crisis, rather than on an ongoing basis. As a contrast with a similar poll conducted in another small donor nation, Poland, in which 77% expressed their belief that Poland should support the development of developing countries. Aliza Belman-Inbal and Shachar Zahavi, [The Rise and Fall of Israel's Bilateral Aid Budget 1958-2008](#), *The Tel Aviv University Hartog School for Government and Policy*, 07/09.

³⁶ See: Shamir, Shlomo, [Israel Joins Board of UN Development Program](#), *Haaretz.com*, 02/02/12.

21st Century Tikkun Olam

In 2012, Reut launched a vision of a ['21st century Tikkun Olam,'](#) as well as strategic guidelines for its implementation. The concept of 21st century Tikkun Olam in our vision entails world Jewry and the State of Israel working together to help solve pressing global issues, and to make a significant, global, and distinctly Jewish and Israeli contribution to the world.