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***Tikkun Olam* and Environmental Restoration: A Jewish Eco-Theology of Redemption**

by Lawrence Troster

*Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what has been twisted?*¹ When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are — how excellent! For your sake I create them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."²

This *Midrash* is one that is frequently quoted in Jewish environmental literature. Jewish environmental action is often connected to the concept of *tikkun olam*. *tikkun olam*, the perfecting or the repairing of the world, has become a major theme in modern Jewish social justice theology. It is usually spoken of as a partnership between humanity and God. Theologically, *tikkun olam* is a concept of limited divine action that exalts human freedom of action. The concept of the God of history who directly controls both natural and human events has lost much of its force in the last 500 years for two main reasons: the ability of modern science since the 16th century to explain natural phenomena using scientific law and the Holocaust, which called into question for most Jews the traditional ideas about divine providence.

Thus *tikkun olam* has been reinterpreted since the 1950s to mean that humans have the responsibility for the perfection and maintenance of the world. Originally, *tikkun olam* was a minor rabbinic concept of amending laws for the betterment of the world. It was altered by Lurianic Kabbalah into a mystical doctrine of salvation, the human repair of the breach in the universe left over by the process of Creation itself. Thus it became an eschatological practice actualized in meditation and prayer. As Lawrence Fine, the Kabbalah scholar has written:

It seems clear that many who use this expression [*tikkun olam*] have derived it from sources other than the mystical tradition. As far as I am aware, the first use of the expression *tikkun olam* in [the United States] was by Shlomo Bardin, the founder of the Brandeis Camp Institute in California. Bardin focused on the notion of *tikkun olam* at least as early as the 1950s. Bardin believed that the *Aleinu* prayer [which, among other things, refers to the restoration of God's sovereignty] was the most important expression of Jewish values, particularly the expression *le-taken olam be-malchut shaddai*, typically translated as "when the world shall be perfected under the reign of the Almighty." While the *Aleinu* clearly has in mind the eradication of idolatry, and universal faith in the God of Israel,

Bardin understood these words to refer to the obligation of Jews to work for a more perfect world...The notion of an ontological rupture and shattering -- which stands at the heart of Lurianic mysticism - -has the capacity to strike a deeply sympathetic chord in a generation which experienced the destruction of European Jewry, or for a generation confronted by the unprecedented danger of global nuclear calamity. Similarly, the focus on human power and human responsibility, in place of divine power and responsibility, which characterizes Lurianism, is a potent theological tool in confronting the dilemma of theodicy [explaining God's justice in the face of the existence of evil] in our own time.³

Thus, use of *tikkun olam* in modern Jewish social justice theology creates an eschatology that sees human freewill, not divine action, as the chief means by which the world will be perfected. But what do Jewish environmentalists imply when they use *tikkun olam*? What kind of Jewish environmental perfection are we seeking? This is an important question, because even if we are seeing the repair or perfection of the world as a symbolic not literal goal, the concept of redemption we choose will shape the way we seek to achieve it. While Jewish environmental theology has, in part, dwelt on Creation theology, little has been done on what a Jewish environmental theology of redemption would look like.

The secular environment movement has often been criticized for presenting to the world only apocalyptic views of possible future environmental disasters. They often have failed to present a positive vision of what a sustainable world would look like. Environmental historian Steven Pyne once wrote: "The real future of environmentalism is in rehabilitation and restoration. Environmentalists have told the story of the Garden of Eden and the fall from grace over and over again. But we haven't yet told the story of redemption. Now we need to tell that story."⁴

Defining our "Perfect" World

Both secular and religious environmentalists need to articulate where they want the world to go. In the Jewish environmental movement there has been no real attempt to define our "perfect" world." Vague notions of *tikkun olam* are often in conflict with the way the natural world really works. In other words, Jewish environmentalism needs an environmental eschatology that is concordance with the scientific understanding of how the natural world actually works. Anything else would require a supernatural ending to the natural world, something modern theology in general and environmental theology in particular has rejected.

The traditional Jewish view of redemption or eschatology has been expressed on three different levels: the individual, the national, and the universal. While there are many Jewish visions of redemption, before the modern age they all assumed that there will come a time when the Jewish people will be restored to their land and living under a Davidic sovereignty; that the individual's soul will survive death and ultimately be restored to a resurrected body; and that there will a profound change in the course of

the world politically as well as in the laws of nature. This will bring about what Neil Gillman has called “The Death of Death.”⁵

This negation of the laws of nature can be seen in the famous prophecy of *Isaiah 11:1-9* in which carnivores will become herbivores. Even in modern Jewish theology that often does not take these visions literally; they are nonetheless seen as important metaphors for structuring our lives with meaning. “The Death of Death” theology even has had an impact on modern Jewish bioethics. Virtually all modern life-extending technology, including the future possibility of radical genetic engineering that would allow humans to live 200 years or more, has been accepted without any qualifications.

An Ecological Perspective on the Natural World

These visions of redemption are in direct conflict with an ecological perspective on the natural world. Biologist Daniel Botkin has written that before the industrial revolution nature was viewed as either an organic entity or a divinely created order. Divinely created nature was “perceived as perfectly ordered and perfectly stable; it achieved constancy, and, when disturbed, returned to that constant condition which was desirable and good.”⁶ After the Industrial Revolution, the natural world was viewed as a machine, a model that is still with us and accounts for much of the distance that humans feel from the natural world. A new model has now emerged that incorporates the understanding that “change is intrinsic and natural at many scales in time and space in the biosphere.” And while change is intrinsic, it is necessary to understand which changes are good and which are not. Also important is the rate of change: certain rates of change are natural, desirable while others are not. An example of this new model that Botkin calls a “discordant harmony” is the extinction rate of species.⁷ Another way to look at the way the universe works is to say that it operates within a dialectic of order and chaos, creativity and destruction, life and death; what has been called “creative destructiveness.”⁸

It is a universal scientific consensus that the world is undergoing a mass extinction of species not seen since the death of the dinosaurs at the end of the Mesozoic period 65 million years ago.⁹ The rate of extinction is difficult to estimate since the number of species itself is not known. Nonetheless, E.O.Wilson has suggested a global extinction rate of 6 percent of all species per decade.¹⁰ Others put the extinction rate much lower, at about 1,000 species per year. The “natural” extinction rate is estimated to be one to two species a year.¹¹ Whatever the actual extinction rate, over the last 200 hundred years, human alteration of the biosphere has resulted in a radical increase in the number of extinct species. The same thing could be said about climate change. It has happened before, but now humans are causing it to occur at an unprecedented rate.

While natural disturbances are random and unpredictable, human changes are more frequent, widespread, and regular. They are off the scale temporally and spatially. While evolutionary change is slow and local, human change because of technology creates changes that are unprecedented in strength, speed, and scope. Even when large-scale natural disturbances such as hurricanes occur, this kind of transformation is

still within the scale of ecological change and is thus still normative. Thus, any environmental theology of redemption must include the idea that death, dynamic change, and evolution are essential to a properly functioning natural order. As environmental historian Carol Merchant has shown in her study of the Eden myth in western culture, the four existent narratives of an eventual recreated Eden (Christian and Jewish, Modern Capitalist, Environmental, and Feminist) have only led to the further destruction of the environment. Every one of these narratives of Eden has the element of the Fall of the natural world into an evil state that only human management can restore to a perfect good.¹² *Tikkun olam*, as it is presently understood, falls completely within this analysis. Through human injustice, the world is a fallen place and only human action (with lip service paid to being in partnership with God) can restore this world to its original perfection. The difference with the vision of *Isaiah 11* is that in the prophet's version of this redemption, God, and not human action, brings about the restoration to Eden.

Incorporating the Jewish Concept of *Tikkun Olam*

A new redemption vision therefore is required that can incorporate the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* into an ecologically sound, dynamic concept of Creation. I suggest that there may be two ways to approach this: the minimal and the maximal. The minimal approach to redemption may be summed by what J.R.R. Tolkien had Gandalf the wizard say about the future:

“Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.”¹³

This approach is similar to Moses Maimonides' naturalistic messianism in which natural laws are not abrogated in the days of the Messiah. Human society improves and, except for resurrection of the dead (in which he may not have actually believed¹⁴), all life goes on as before, but in peace, prosperity, and harmony. A minimal approach seeks no grand vision, no final redemptive state, but rather seeks to solve the environmental crisis in a spirit of humility and modesty by pragmatic acts and policies that will bring about a sustainable world for future generations.

A more maximal approach would be to redefine *tikkun olam* as ecological restoration. Eric Higgs has defined ecological restoration as “the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.”¹⁵ Ecological restoration must be a process, not an end product. It requires what Higgs calls a “genuine conversation” between restorationists and natural processes in order for it to work properly. This conversation ensures that the interests of both people *and* ecosystems are both deeply understood and appreciated. This kind of conversation occurs when those doing the restoration take the time to fully understand the place as it is and “listen” to the ecosystem. As Higgs points out, “The loud, garrulous humans will always dominate unless specific attention is given to the soft-spoken ecosystem...”¹⁶

Another way to express this kind of human dialogue with Creation is found in Carolyn Merchant's "partnership ethics" that she posits as a re-mything or even replacement for the Edenic Recovery Narrative. The new story would not accept the patriarchal sequence of creation, but might instead emphasize simultaneous creation, cooperative male/female evolution, or an emergence out of chaos or the earth. It would not accept the idea of subduing the earth, or even dressing and keeping the garden, since both entail total domestication and control by human beings. Instead, each earthly place would be a home, a community, to be shared with other living and nonliving things. The needs of both humans and nonhumans would be dynamically balanced.

Merchant's partnership ethics is similar to Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic" that requires us to enlarge

"the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land... In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."¹⁷

Such a new communal version of *tikkun olam*, in which the rest of Creation is now our partners in repairing the world from what we must admit is the degradation that we caused, finds echoes in *Psalms 148*. *Psalms 148* is a creation hymn, a kind of poetic map of the universe in which the purpose of all life is the praise of God. The universe reflected by this psalm is a harmonious order in which humans have no primacy of place and are not the dominant power. Instead, humanity is part of earthly choir which joins with the heavenly choir in singing the praise of their Creator. *Psalms 148* pictures humans as part of a community of worshippers that includes animal life, the forces of the natural world (the weather), the landscape, the stars, planets, and hosts of the heavens.

This vision of what our relations to the rest of Creation *should* be can be our guide to a new form of redemption, a Jewish environmental *tikkun olam*. It requires us to give up the idea that we always know what is best for the natural world. It requires us to listen to the other voices in the choir and to take their needs and goals into account, not only our wants and desires. *Tikkun olam* then becomes a vision of restoration, of partnership with the rest of life, and a kind of harmony that is not a static, changeless world, but more a "discordant harmony," a grand symphony of theme and variation which celebrates the beauty and the tragedy in the diversity of Creation.

Endnotes:

1. *Ecclesiastes 7:13*
2. *Midrash Rabbah to Ecclesiastes 7:13, #1*
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7. Ibid, pp. 12-13, 188-192.
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16. Ibid, p. 286.
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