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A TIKKUN OLAM SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Years ago, I adopted a mantra that came to me out of the blue: *עֲנִי רוֹצֵה לְהַיּוֹת עֶבֶד הַיְיָ לְתַקֵּן אֶת הָעוֹלָם* (*ani rotzeh li-hi-yot ev-ed ha-shem le-ta-kein et ha-o-lam*)—I want to be a servant of God to repair the whole world.

Not surprisingly, I was painfully aware of having no idea of *what* would be required to “repair the whole world” or *how* anyone could do it. What followed then was a tug-of-war within me between the absurd idea that I should somehow repair the whole world, and the humbling recognition that simply repairing myself was a daunting challenge. It was a psychic struggle which remained unresolved for several years, waiting on my learning a number of fateful lessons (about which, more below).

Olam as Divine Providence

Our tradition offers us numerous ways to understand *תְּקוּן עוֹלָם* (*ti-kun o-lam*). For me, the less-complicated part of the expression is *תְּקוּן* (*ti-kun*), which means to repair or straighten that which is broken or bent from what it once was or should be (which is unlike the much more complex conceptions of the Kabbalists). But what about *עוֹלָם* (*o-lam*)? What “world,” specifically, should we repair or straighten?

My definition of *olam* was refined by Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) through his commentary on Bereshit (Genesis) 21:33. The *שׁוֹרֵשׁ* (*sho-resh*), the linguistic Hebrew root of *olam*, which is *ayin-lamed-mem* (א-ל-מ), refers to that which is hidden or withdrawn. Rabbi Hirsch defines *אֵל עוֹלָם* (*eil o-lam*), a name of God, as “. . . the One Who sows the future with invisible seeds in the present.” Rabbi Hirsch also teaches that, God should be thought of as “. . . the Ruler and Director of the hidden future which is slowly maturing to perfection in the course of time. For every second truly lived is in the very centre of that eternity in which we all will not only participate but in which we are participating if we are what we should be.”

This name of God, *Eil Olam*, draws our attention to the God who rules the distant future, which is hidden from us. In effect, *olam* traces the trajectory of *הַשְּׂגָחָה* (*hash-ga-cha*), God’s providence—the Divine plan for the unfolding of the entire Creation; and God’s special, individualized providence, *הַשְּׂגָחָה פְּרָטִית* (*hash-ga-cha*

pe-ra-tit)—the Divine plan for the unfolding of our individual lives. Our repair of the *olam*, then, presupposes applying ourselves, ideally all humankind, to straighten the unfolding Divine path which is forever pushed off its course by our misdeeds. Practically, it requires that we live our lives as “what we should be,” acolytes and activists according to the Torah’s vision of righteousness, truth, and justice—the base of moral-spiritual life; and freedom, peace, and compassion—the indispensable institutional features that sustain a moral-spiritual commonweal.

Integration for the Sake of Heaven

Is it possible to fully dedicate oneself to repair of the *olam*, honoring the Torah’s ideals in action, and at the same time to repair oneself? I found my way out of this conundrum with the help of the *מְסוֹרָה* (*ma-so-rah*)—Jewish traditional wisdom, knowledge and practice—taught by Rabbi Hirsch and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), and by the insights of contemporary interpersonal neurobiology. What follows are the basic steps in my navigating my way to a *holistic* commitment to *tikkun olam*.

It may be useful, first, to say what I learned best in my spiritual odyssey: *יֵשׁ לִי גּוּף מְשׁוּלָב לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם* (*yeish li guf me-shu-lav le-sheim sha-ma-yim*)—*I have an integrated body for the sake of heaven*. The meaning of that awareness, for all intents and purposes, affirmed that *tikkun olam* requires me to actively seek “*integration*”—first, encompassing all the parts of myself, then with others in the world, and finally with the planet—doing all, more or less at the same time, as best I can.

We achieve integration when we link differentiated parts so they work together harmoniously. At the outset, integration of our brain and body is the basis for every form of regulation—including: emotion, mood, affect, thought, and behavior. When we ignore our differentiated parts and those of others or the planet, chaos and rigidity eventually emerge.

What’s the connection between our individual integration and *tikkun olam*? My getting the answer to that question began by recognizing that the commandment *וְלֹא תִתֵּן מְכֻשֵׁל* (*ve-leif-nei i-veir lo ti-tein mich-shol*)—Do not place a stumbling block [which spurs

immoral behavior] before the blind (Vayikra 19:14) plays a decisive role in *tikkun olam*. The reach of the מצוה (*mitz-vah*—commandment) is extended by the positive duty to remove a stumbling block from before the blind (or from those who are blinded by a variety of conditions), based on several textual allusions (recounted in Moed Katan 5a). These include the familiar exhortation to עמי מדריך עמי (*ha-ri-mu mich-shol mi-de-rech ami*)—Take up the stumbling block from the way of my people (Isaiah 57:14). What may not be immediately apparent to us is that this charge applies to ourselves. We have the wherewithal to remove the stumbling blocks in our own character and personality, such as selfishness and dishonesty, which blind us to our own misguided words and deeds. While some of these barriers may exist as conscious attitudes and emotions, which are relatively accessible to ameliorate, others may be buried in our unconscious, requiring integration-focused therapeutic methods to overcome.

Try to imagine what it would mean to have integrated all the parts of yourself for the sake of heaven—to do God’s will with all your heart and mind and soul. In effect, try to picture marshalling not only your physical body, rational mind, and manageable emotions, but also the memories and feelings that reside deep in your brainstem and limbic brain (which elude your conscious awareness and control), plus all your moral-spiritual potential. When we connect all our parts, including the unconscious, we experience the Creator’s gift of integration, the flowering of all our possibilities as *human-kind*. Then we have the wherewithal to bring the soul implanted within us fully into our purposeful life, totally energizing our unique spiritual capacity for moral and ethical action that can transform the world.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (b. 1937) reminds us that our tradition teaches we can return to a godly way of life, effectively covering over our past misbehavior and fulfilling our moral-spiritual potential, because “All forms of *teshuvah* [תשובה—turning or returning], however diverse and complex, have a common core: that human beings have it in their power to effect inward change.”

How is it possible to achieve such an extraordinary experience? Of course, Judaism provides to us detailed guidance on repentance. The traditional resources can be substantially potentiated, however, by the psychic discipline of mindfulness—intentionally focusing our attention—so that each breath we take aligns our קוּנָה (*ka-va-nah*), our intention, and our מַעֲשֵׂה (*ma-a-seh*), our action, with the גַּאֲוֹן הַכֹּל (*ga-on ha-kol*), the Mastermind of All.

Mindfulness discipline can sharpen our realization that humans have been uniquely endowed with the free-willed power to transform our moral-spiritual awareness into practical effects in the material world—for instance, when we witness injustice, recognize the moral evil it represents, and take practical action to stop it. We can understand this potential from a scientific

viewpoint. Our mental-awareness—say a thought, an emotion, or a memory—exists as an “emergent property of energy,” the result of the integration of the mind’s elements, which regulate energy and information flow. Thereby, the mind manages transitions from mental possibilities to material actualities, which also defines our incorporeal Creator מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם (*mi sh-a-mar ve-ha-ya ha-olam*)—who spoke and the world came into being (Eruvin 13b), in whose image, our *masorah* teaches us, we are created.

How can we understand in practical terms that a non-material, spiritual entity, our God, created or alters the material world? We ordinarily believe it’s necessary to understand God in order to understand ourselves as humans. Although that’s often true, it’s also problematic in some respects, because God is incorporeal, ultimately unknowable to material beings like us. So, in many ways, the opposite kind of knowing, when we know more about God because of what we know about ourselves, can be revealing. If we imagine a kind of “reverse engineering” of the archetypal human being, we can reason with metaphors how it’s possible that by “speaking,” something which is ordinarily prompted by a non-material phenomenon, a “thought,” God created the physical world, including us. It stands to reason, because it’s irrational to think that what we can do as humans, such as transform a spiritual awareness into practical consequences in the material world, is not within the power of our Creator.

Recognizing God’s awesome power, it was necessary for me to acknowledge that, although I have been blessed with moral and ethical free will, God is the Creator and Mastermind of the מִצְוֹת (*mitz-vot*), the commandments, which entail the consequences we experience from our free-willed choices. We encounter these consequences in material realms, such as biology, physics, and cosmology; and in the non-material, spiritual realms of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and compassion. So it made sense to me that the most promising life is one in which responding to the *mitzvot* is the be-all and end-all of one created in the image of God.

To bring about *tikkun olam*, then, as one of God’s humans, requires recognition that the Mastermind of All created us in the Divine Image. So that with each inhalation of breath, we reinforce in ourselves, awareness of the *Gaon*, the Mastermind; and with each exhalation, we remind ourselves of *Hakol*, that God is masterminding *all* of the Creation—including the potential for us to integrate all the parts of ourselves and the consequences of our actions. Through the integration of our body, mind, emotions, and spirit, we awaken the infinite potential of our נֶשְׁמַת טְהוֹרָה (*ne-sha-ma ta-ho-ra*—pure soul) for *moral action* in the world beyond ourselves. We learn to appreciate that it’s possible to add our capability to contribute unique goodness to all the other efforts to transform the material world in the Divine Image—which,

again, brings to mind my *kavanah*: *I have an integrated body for the sake of heaven.*

Inevitability of Oppositional Obstacles

What conditions of day-to-day life obstruct our efforts to repair the world?

The objective of our personal integration is to find a place of physical well-being, mental clarity, emotional balance, and moral conviction for our mundane life. But we are all subject to oppositional forces, when we feel pressured to act in ways that seem inherently contradictory—to do what appears to be impossible.

Much credit for our insight into this vexation in life is due to the teaching of Rabbi Soloveitchik in *Majesty and Humility*.

We feel pressured to be *fully* invested both in associations of caring—such as families, faith communities, and support groups; and in institutions of creativity—such as corporations, universities, and labor organizations. We’re often torn between wanting recognition, to be valued for our achievements; and longing for redemption, to realize our essential goodness, which we may bury within ourselves. In some places and times, we want only to assert command and gain renown; in others we want both to give and get compassion, solitude, and peace. Sometimes we’re fully preoccupied with the struggle to control others; other times we’re fully preoccupied with the struggle for self-control. We are occasionally confused by our contradictory experiences of seemingly unlimited power in some circumstances and debilitating powerlessness in others. Despite asserting dominion in many aspects of our life, we have an abiding sense of being incomplete, even feeble at times. We are often confused about who the “real me” is *going to be*—as if we’re still teenagers waiting to grow up. And not surprisingly, our two-sided persona often takes us on an emotional roller-coaster ride, which reverberates throughout the other parts of our life.

While we may naïvely seek a kind of continuous, lifelong psychic symmetry, we know from experience that human beings never find unending harmony or happiness. Our search for non-stop bliss is self-deluded and doomed, because none of our victories or our defeats in life are ever complete or permanent. So we live with cognitive dissonance, never escaping from contradictory beliefs, ideas, and values, hopes and dreams, and demands for action—which sap a great deal of our moral-spiritual energy. It’s as if we have a two-sided persona.

Soul-Mind and Moral Spirituality

Given the totality of our experience, it is still possible to manage the oppositional contradictions from a place of integration. We want to discern the two worlds and the two sides of our persona, doing so from what we might think of as the psychic “space” between them, aware of them separately yet simultaneously. So, instead of them

jerking us back and forth between them in our day-to-day life, we purposefully choose—calmly and thoughtfully—to be in both worlds and both personas at the same time.

The cognitive space that is untouched by the back and forth movement, allowing our awareness of both sides simultaneously and enabling moral decisions, we might regard as our “observation and action central.” We experience it as the *נֶשְׁמַת הַדַּעַת* (*ne-sha-ma dei-ah*—soul-mind), an awareness that includes our moral sensibility, which is “breathed into” us singularly as humans by our Creator (Bereshit/Genesis 2:7) in ways we cannot fully comprehend. It matches the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “psyche” as the human soul or spirit, related to the breath.

We cannot speak scientifically about the origination of the *neshama deiah*, but we now know—we have a body research findings from studies of interpersonal neurobiology and neuropsychiatry—how it manages that which we regard as the self.

Much of our most illuminating knowledge on the subject reflects the research, teaching, and clinical practice of Dr. Daniel Siegel, clinical professor psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, and Executive Director of the Mindsight Institute.

The mind is distinguished from the brain, much as a driver who sets the direction and speed of a car is distinguished from the vehicle that is the means of travel but that is not self-operated. The “brain” includes not only the organ encased in the skull, but the embodied nervous system which is distributed throughout the entire organism. The mind, by controlling neural energy and information flow, makes it possible to re-fire and then re-wire the neurons of the in-skull brain, transforming the physical structure of the brain and permanently modifying our mental and emotional initiatives and responses, both conscious and unconscious. Far-fetched as it may sound, the mind can also switch chromosomes on and off, with wide-ranging effects on the quality of our life. The take-away here is that the mind is our means of overseeing all our ways of *knowing*, not only conscious awareness, and our means of superintending the triggers of our behavior.

One of the *emergent* properties of the mind is that it’s self-organizing. This is done by constructing meanings, including a sense of individual personhood or self (sometimes mistaken and destructive), which is made possible by differentiating and linking. The mind can also deconstruct meanings. Optimal self-organization of the mind is flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. In combination, these characteristics define mental health. But when self-organization is not optimal, we experience chaos or rigidity, which are the universal benchmarks of all definitions of mental illness.

From birth and throughout life, the mind depends on our reciprocal, socio-emotional attachment to other

human beings, both for its own development and for our survival, individually and communally. Its empathic sensibility, the outcome of healthy attachment in infancy, serves as the seedbed of our moral-spirituality—our thinking about the greater good. And all this is crucial to our ability to overcome the much more challenging psychic and practical conflicts we confront in life.

When we face oppositional moral choices, our *neshama deiah* is ambivalent, a response which may be driven by our unconscious learning history, and which may be manifested in psychic and bodily infirmities. The oppositional dimensions of our lives can be signaled, for example, by the stronger and weaker sides of our body, such as when the strength of one leg, hand, arm, and eye over the other is discernable. The contrasts in bodily strength may signpost our divided persona which we enact in the two worlds we occupy. To see more clearly the contrasts between your two worlds and two personas, try the following brief meditations:

With your eyes closed, focus your awareness on the *stronger* side of your body. Take a few moments to recall a memory in which you were in some way creatively masterful, for which you received recognition and felt the achievement had made your life more worthwhile. Allow yourself to dwell on the details of that experience and, in particular, to once again think the thoughts and feel the gratifying emotions that you felt then.

Now, once more with your eyes closed, focus your awareness on the *weaker* side of your body. Take a few moments to recall a memory in which you were in some way powerless, humbled, or even humiliated, an instance in which you wanted nothing but compassion and comfort. Allow yourself to dwell on the details of that experience and, in particular, to once again think the thoughts and feel the painful emotions that you felt then.

Consider that, using mindfulness, you occupied an awareness-space in which you could see—enlightened by focusing your attention—parts of yourself that are in psychic opposition. It's a place from which you can observe both sides of your persona. When we are in that space, we are using our soul-mind, our *neshama deiah*, the part of ourself that harbors awareness and our morally free-willed soul. We are even using our soul-mind when we decide to actively pursue body-mind-emotion-spirit integration, liberating our moral-spirituality from the bonds of childhood neglect and trauma.

Creators of Ourselves

The essence of this process is *not* supernatural in any sense, but simply an integration of all our parts, allowing us to uncover, neurologically, our *neshama tahora*, our pure soul. Rabbi Soloveitchik teaches that we are created as humans *to be creators*; and that our first task is to create ourselves as complete, integrated, moral-spiritual beings. The goal is to fulfill the will of our

Creator, which ultimately is the shortest route to finding our own fulfillment. On the physiological level, it requires a neurobiological re-firing and re-wiring of our brain neurons, which is directed by our *neshama deiah*.

Encouragingly, during the past decade a number of modalities to purposely achieve restructuring of brain architecture have been recognized in the field of neuropsychiatry. These include mindfulness, meditation, yoga, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), and a variety of music and movement techniques.

But in what image or for what purposes are we to create ourself? In our highs and lows, we are dogged by penetrating questions that challenge our *neshama deiah* to referee the persistent struggle between the two sides of our persona. These questions may rationally be regarded as originating from an omniscient, omnipotent, Divine Source beyond ourselves, given their universality in highlighting the moral choices we face. Eventually, we choose either commitment to our own immediate pleasure, comfort and convenience, or to something greater than ourself but on which our lifelong well-being depends. Consider some of the kinds of choices in the following fanciful scenario:

Imagine that you're the solo driver of a long-haul truck and semi-trailer, making deliveries around the country. You're getting ready to go on the road and, although your truck is fully loaded, it's carrying an unusual load—only six large containers. Checking the load, strangely enough you find that the first container is packed with *righteousness*; the second, with *truth*; the third, *justice*; and the fourth, fifth, and sixth, *freedom, peace, and compassion*. It gives you pause—but you decide to accept this twilight-zone curiosity. As you check your delivery route, you see that you have a number of stops to make.

On the road, your first delivery is to a senior clergyman who has been covering up the pedophilia and other sexual predations of his junior colleagues. When you arrive, you inform him that you have a delivery of *righteousness* for him . . . but he tells you he's not going to accept delivery.

At that moment, something else very strange happens: You hear a penetrating godly voice that asks: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

Your second delivery is to an awards dinner for the best Madison Avenue advertising campaign of the past year, one in which the winning agency produced TV commercials for high-carb foods that are the primary cause of the country's epidemic of metabolic syndrome diseases, like diabetes. When you arrive, you inform them that you have a delivery of *truth* for them . . . but they tell you they're not going to accept delivery.

Then you again hear that penetrating godly voice, asking: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

Your third delivery is to the police chief of the city where you live, who you happen to know personally, and who has failed to train his officers to treat domestic violence as a crime. When you arrive, you inform him that you have a delivery of *justice* for him . . . but he tells you he's not going to accept delivery.

You again hear that godly voice, asking: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

Your fourth delivery is to a meeting of a state legislature, one which has been working non-stop to suppress voting by minorities, the poor, college students, and the elderly. When you arrive, you inform them that you have a delivery of *freedom* for them . . . but they tell you they're not going to accept delivery.

Again, the godly voice comes: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

Your fifth delivery is to a meeting of neighborhood watch members who have been stopping and interrogating anyone of color they see in their neighborhood after dark, usually reporting them to the police as suspicious, often resulting in their arrest or much worse—which is stoking racial animosity in the city. When you arrive, you inform them that you have a delivery of *peace* for them . . . but they tell you they're not going to accept delivery.

Then the godly voice comes: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

Your last delivery is to random strangers you encounter on the street of a major city, all of whom ignore your attempts to distract them from their smart-phones and tablets to get them to listen to you and to see what's happening around them. You try to inform them that you have a delivery of *compassion* for them, but you can't get their attention.

Undimmed, the godly voice asks: What do you think about this situation, and what—if anything—are *you* going to *do* about it?

After a few moments of silence, the godly voice returns one last time to confront you pointedly, saying: What are you doing down there with the unparalleled gift of life I gave you?

Each of these situations forces us to confront a difficult choice, but our *neshama deiah* can consider both sides calmly. We can clearly see the opposing forces in our lives and purposefully take charge of them, rather than their taking charge of us. So, regardless of whether we're working as a truck-driver, nurse, janitor, manager, doctor, teacher, laborer, or lawyer—wherever we're

working and whatever we're doing—our *neshama deiah* is empowered to choose how we use our integrated bodies.

But, given the tensions between the two worlds and the two sides of our persona, how is it possible for us to make that choice?

Unifying Moral Spirituality

How is it possible, practically, for our *neshama deiah* to unify the two sides of our persona?

Our persona becomes unified when we have only one set of moral-spiritual behavioral guidelines for both of the worlds we occupy—specifically: righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and compassion. These guidelines ideally are linked to one another, producing a combined effect larger than their individual impact. When we honor them by our actions, we hasten *tikkun olam*; when we abandon them, we hasten the *קץ תאושתנו* (*keitz ha-eh-no-shute*—the demise of humankind). Consider the bleakest, already extant possibilities: without righteousness, there is no truth; without truth, there is no justice; without justice, there is no freedom; without freedom, there is no peace; and without peace, there is no compassion. However, when we live up to these guidelines, regardless of which world we're in, our persona becomes unified. We become one by having activated the potential virtue of our *neshama tahora*, our pure soul, to contribute unique goodness to *both* worlds.

We can serve that purpose in a corporate organization or a covenantal community, on a construction site or in a 12-step group, in a university classroom or a neighborhood watch meeting, in a pick-up basketball game or a pool hall. Regardless of which world we occupy at any moment, our moral-spiritual *kavanah* remains the same.

It is the *neshama deiah* that empowers us to uplift our own life, the lives of others with whom we're interconnected, and the planet on which we all live. Whether we're engaged in command and control, or retreating in the face of loss, defeat, or failure, we can still join in that transformative mission. It is our choice.

It is a mark of our spiritual maturity, however, to recognize that for many of us, the cost of making that choice is a painful transformation from being a *taker* to being a *giver*. But it is still our choice . . . to live an integrated life for God's sake.

Which brings us back one last time to my *kavanah*: *I have an integrated body for the sake of heaven—to repair both myself and the world in the Divine Image.*

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