



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE
of NORTH AMERICA

Us and Them: Jewish Responsibility for the World

Background Reading

A. Contemporary Theologians on Human Empowerment to Fix the World: In Pursuit of Human Dignity

1. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*
2. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, His Creative Capacity, section 1
3. Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews* pp. 198-199
4. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 82

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9. Isaiah 57:15 cited in Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 31a in reference to gifts to the poor
10. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 11a
11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 6

C. Beyond Law and toward a Natural Theology of Giving: *Hesed* for Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler

12. Jacob J. Schacter, "Tikkun Olam: Defining the Jewish Obligation" in *Rav Chesed*, essays in honor of Haskel Lookstein, edited by Rafael Medoff, p.196, based on R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 4, pp. 245-246 and *Kuntress Hachessed in Michtav M'Eliahu* vol. 1, pp. 32-51, 140-145

A. Contemporary Theologians on Human Empowerment to Fix the World: In Pursuit of Human Dignity

1. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*

Men of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity . . . The brute is helpless, and therefore not dignified. Civilized man has gained limited control of nature and has become in certain respects her master, and with his mastery he has attained dignity as well. His mastery has made it possible for him to act in accordance with his responsibility.

2. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man, His Creative Capacity*, section 1

We are human beings, committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind ...interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy, etc.

[...]

Halakhic man is a man who longs to create, to bring into being something new, something original. The study of Torah, by definition, means gleaning new, creative insights from the Torah (*hiddushei Torah*). ... This notion of *hiddush*, of creative interpretation, is not limited solely to the theoretical domain but extends as well into the practical domain, into the real world. The most fervent desire of halakhic man is **to behold the replenishment of the deficiency in creation, when the real world will conform to the ideal world** and the most exalted and glorious of creations, the ideal Halakhah, will be actualized in its midst. The dream of creation is the central idea in the halakhic consciousness - the idea of the importance of **man as a partner of the Almighty in the act of creation, man as creator of worlds**. This longing for creation and the renewal of the cosmos is embodied in all of Judaism's goals. The peak of religious ethical perfection to which Judaism aspires is man as creator. When God created the world, he provided an opportunity for the work of His hands – man - to participate in His creation. The **Creator, as it were, impaired reality in order that mortal man could repair its flaws and perfect it**. .. Man's task is to "fashion, engrave, attach, and create," (*Book of Yetzira*) and transform the emptiness in being into a perfect and holy existence, bearing the imprint of the divine name. ...Repentance is an act of self-creation.

3. Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews* pp. 198-199

For American Jews, *tikkun olam* - the repair of the world - means God's world, but it does not work as it was meant to. The story begins with Eden, and goes on through the trials and errors of all the generations since. This exquisitely organic whole, this ecological masterpiece, has been fractured a thousand times, has been scarred and marred and blighted and polluted and bloodied, its beauty transformed, become hideous; it does not work; not as it was meant to, not as it might.

We are called to see the beauty through the blemishes, to believe it can be restored, and to feel ourselves implicated in its restoration. We are called to be fixers. We are so called whether Eden is fable or fact, whether Sinai is law or lore. And "all the rest," as it is said, "is commentary.

[...]

Many American Jews have come to view ethics as the very essence of Judaism. It is the thread in Judaism's tapestry that weaves most neatly into America's own moral claims.... American Jewry is distinguished ...by the opportunity it is offered, as an empowered community, to move from ethics to justice, to define itself as a partnership in *tikkun olam*. In America, in our time, such a partnership can serve as our preeminent motive, the path through which our past is vindicated, our present warranted, and our future affirmed.

4. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 82

To live the life of faith is to hear the cry of the afflicted, the lonely and marginal, the poor, the sick and disempowered, and to respond. For the world is not yet mended, there is work still to do, and God has empowered us to do it - with him, for him and for his faith in us.

B. From Indifference to Sympathy

5. Exodus 2:11 with Rashi

<p>יא וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם, וַיַּגְדֵּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא, בְּסִבְלָתָם; וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצָּרֵי, מִכָּה אִישׁ-עֲבָרֵי מֵאֲחִיו.</p>	<p>11 Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens.</p>
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Rashi glosses as “giving his eyes and his heart so as to suffer with them.”

וירא בסבלתם - נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם:

6. Exodus Rabbah 1:32

What is meant by “he saw”? He looked upon their burdens and cried, saying, “I grieve for you! Would that I might give my life for you!” There is no labor more difficult than laboring with the loam. But Moshe placed his shoulders [to their burdens], and he helped each one of them.

The Holy One said, “You neglected your own affairs, while you went to observe the affliction of Israel, and you treated them as brothers. I will neglect both angels and earthdwellers, and I will speak with you.” Hence, it says, *And the Adonai saw that he turned to look*. The Almighty saw that Moshe had turned away from his own affairs to take heed of their burdens; therefore, *G-d called out to him out of the midst of the bush*.

7. Exodus Rabbah on Exodus 2:11-15

Adonai saw that Moshe “turned (*sa’ar*) to look” at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4). The Holy One said: This individual [Moshe] is grieved (*sa’ar*) and troubled to behold the anguish of Israel in Egypt. Therefore is he worthy of becoming their shepherd.

8. Exodus Rabbah 2:7

The Master of the World said to Moshe: Are you not aware that I am in distress, just as Israel is in distress? Know this, then, by the place from which I am speaking to you - from amidst the thorns. I am, as it were, a “partner” in their distress.

9. Isaiah 57:15 cited in Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 31a in reference to gifts to the poor

I dwell in the high and holy place, yet I am with those who are oppressed and downtrodden in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly ones and to revive the heart of the oppressed.

(שם סעיה ב)

10. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 11a

An individual should share in the distress of the community, for thus have we found in regard to Moshe Rabbeinu, that he shared in the distress of the community, as it says, *And the hands of Moshe were heavy, and they took a stone and it beneath him, and he sat upon it.*(Exodus 17:12)

Now did Moshe not possess even one pillow or one cushion upon which to sit?

However, this is what Moshe said: "Since Israel is in a state of distress, so, too, will I share in their distress." Whoever shares in the distress of the community, will be worthy of witnessing their consolation.

אזכרה
 מקור המלה הוא בארמית
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11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 6

Prophetic Pathos. Sympathy is an act in which a person is open to the presence of another person. Prophetic sympathy is no delight; unlike ecstasy it is not a goal but a sense of challenge and a commitment.... The unique feature of religious sympathy is not self-conquest but **self-dedication**; not the suppression of emotion but its redirection; not silent subordination, but active cooperation with God.

Authentic utterance derives from a moment of identification of a person and a word. He is one not only with what he says; he is involved with his people in what his words foreshadow. This is the secret of the prophet's style: **his life and soul are at stake in what he says and in what is going to happen to what he says**. What is more, both theme and identification are seen in **three dimensions**. Not only the prophet and the people, but God Himself is involved in what the words convey.

C. Beyond Law and toward a Natural Theology of Giving: *Hesed* for Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler

12. Jacob J. Schacter, "Tikkun Olam: Defining the Jewish Obligation" in *Rav Chesed*, essays in honor of Haskel Lookstein, edited by Rafael Medoff, p.196¹

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler understood that these obligations of Jews toward Gentiles, predicated upon this rationale of *mipnei darkei shalom*, represented a fundamental general requirement for Jews to treat all human beings with *derekh eretz*, no strings attached. He made the point that Abraham's greatest test was having to negotiate with the *Bnei Het* [pagans of Hebron] for a burial place for his wife while her dead body still lay before him and while his grief over her passing was still fresh and intense. Yet, despite his deep distress, he made sure to treat them properly and respectfully in keeping with "a fundamental principle with regard to *derekh eretz* [the ethical way off the world]. The other need not suffer because I am in pain:" In this context he quoted the rabbinic and Maimonidean ruling that one must seek the welfare of Gentiles *mipnei darkei shalom*. For Rabbi Dessler, a human being is deserving of respectful behavior simply and only by virtue of their being human (Avot [3:4]: "Beloved is the human being [read: including a nonJew] who was created in the image [of God])."

[...]

¹ Based on R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 4, pp. 245-246 and *Kuntress Hachessed* in *Michtav M'Eliyahu* vol. 1, pp. 32-51, 140-145

When God created the human being, God made the human a giver and a taker. The power of **giving** is the supreme power among the traits of the Creator of all, the blessed One, who has mercy, does good, and gives without receiving anything in exchange. (God lacks nothing, as the verse says, '*If you are righteous, what do you give him?*' [Job 35:7] and we are only able to express our thanks, the roots of our service of God.) Thus God made the human '*In the image of God, God made the human,*' so that humans would show mercy, do good, and give (Chapter 1).

[...]

But the power of **taking** is the human desire to pull to oneself everything that comes within one's domain. This power is what people refer to as '**self love**,' and it is the source of all evil. (Chapter 3)

[...]

One sees that joy is incomplete when alone and desires society....That is why we want children – they fulfill the need to love them and to share goodness with them. Thus love and giving come together. ...But what comes first? The love comes from the giving ...For whatever one gives to others is not lost to the giver but it is **an extension of self**, for one feels they have a piece of in that friend. That is the *devekut* – the glue of attraction between people that is called love (Chapter 4).

[...]

For there is no gap between you and the other for you are one (Chapter 5).