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Parashat B'reishit

"I Made a Difference to That One": *Tikkun* in Our Lives and in the World

Let me tell you a story.

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One warm summer night, while everyone slept, a great storm thundered over a seaside village. The next day, a little girl awoke to bright sunshine… She couldn't wait to get to the beach. …

She walked until she came across a starfish wriggling in the dry sand. Washed ashore by the storm, it was stuck. Soon it would die. …

"I guess the only one who can save you is me," she said to the starfish. … She had never picked up a living starfish before, and she wasn't terribly sure how to do it. Using two fingers, she gently pinched one of its five points and held the starfish up to her face. "I'm going to send you home," she said. … She swung it forward quickly, letting the starfish go with a wide, open hand. Spinning gently, the starfish sailed through the air and landed in the water with a soft "plop."

The little girl smiled and continued walking down the beach. But after just a few steps, she found another starfish wriggling in the sand. No sooner had she tossed this one back to the sea than she came across another starfish. And then another one. And then another…. She tossed each one back to the sea. …

[Though there were "thousands of starfish washed up on the beach," the little girl kept throwing them one-by-one into the ocean. A crowd gathered and laughed at the little girl. "She couldn't possibly make a difference," they said.]

Finally, an older man, considered wise by all the town, decided he had seen enough. … "Little girl," he said, "there are hundreds of thousands of starfish washed up on the beach, you can't possibly hope to make a difference."

[The little girl was embarrassed, especially when she noticed the crowd laughing at her. But then she picked up another starfish and tossed it, too, into the sea.]

The little girl turned back to the older man, and with a smile of great joy, said: "I made a difference to that one!"

And then, from the back of the silent crowd of people, a little boy came forward. He walked over to the little girl, picked up a starfish, and sent it soaring gently back to the sea. As it, too, landed with a soft "plop," the little boy said, "And I made a difference to that one!" The little boy's mother and father then joined their son. "I made a difference to that one!" said the mother, smiling. "And I made a difference to that one!" said the father, laughing. One by one, every member of the crowd joined in tossing starfish back to the sea, calling "I made a difference to that one" each time. Finally, even the older man reached down, picked up a starfish and tossed it gently to

the sea. As he heard it land with a soft "plop," he looked over at the little girl and, catching her eye, said in a voice that everyone could hear, "And even I made a difference to that one!"[1]

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I first heard this story during my "service year" after college. I was part of City Year, an AmeriCorps program whose tagline is "Idealism in Action." The Starfish Story is one of City Year's so-called "Founding Stories," and this version was written by City Year's co-founder, Michael Brown. The story exemplifies the notion that individual people can make a small but meaningful difference in the world; moreover, these acts of justice and love can inspire large groups of people to do the same.

This is also a story that elegantly illustrates the Jewish concept of *tikkun*, or "repair." The familiar phrase *tikkun olam* means "repairing the world" and refers to our ability to make the world a better place. While no single person can heal the world's wounds, groups of people inspired to make a change can quite literally transform the world. Commonly paired with this slogan of social justice is Rabbi Tarfon's teaching from Pirkei Avot (2:16): "You are not responsible to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

There are several other ways that *tikkun* is understood in Jewish tradition. In one strand of tradition, *tikkun olam* is in human hands. In the Mishnah, the earliest collection of rabbinic writings from around the 2nd century of the common era, we find several instances where innovative legal rulings are established *mipnei tikkun ha-olam*, "for the sake of repairing the world."[2] These rulings emerge when a rabbi perceives that the law is unambiguous and also immoral and therefore needs to be overturned by legislative fiat. It's a rare and bold corrective measure that relies on the notion that morality is larger than law, and wise and sympathetic experts can take radical steps to rein in harmful policies.

In a second stream of tradition, *tikun olam* is dependent on God. The Aleinu, for example, beseeches God *l'taken olam,* to repair the world—that is, to redeem it from its evils. And a 6th-century midrash about this week's *parashah* teaches that the boundaries and distinctions God made on the second day aren't good, and it's hard to understand why they was created. Still, the midrash insists that division was *necessary*; it was done *l'tikkuno shel olam*, for the sake of the world's repair (Genesis Rabbah 4:7). These texts look to God as the ultimate source of *tikkun*, as God is the only one who can see the whole picture at once.

Finally, in the mystical kabbalah of Isaac Luria, these two notions of *tikkun* are combined—*tikkun olam* becomes a joint project of humans and God together. Nearly 500 years ago, Rabbi Luria crafted the parable of *tzimtzum*, or contraction. Before the world

[1] Michael Brown's "The Starfish Story," published in *The City Year Handbook* (2004), p. 180 (https://studylib.net/doc/8437655/pitw-%23138---city-year). Brown's version credits "The Star Thrower" by Loren C. Eiseley.
[2] See, for example, Mishnah Gittin 4:2.

began, Luria teaches, God was everywhere, both physically and spiritually. In order to make room for the universe and everything in it, God literally and figuratively pulled back. Into this new void, God emanated divine light, which brought life to the world—but the light was so powerful that its vessels shattered into disparate pieces. Every time someone performs a mitzvah, a sacred deed of goodness, broken shards become whole again. Person by person, mitzvah by mitzvah, repair flourishes.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, human beings are divine agents, blending the physical and spiritual; and individual human actions reverberate through creation, making a difference, so to speak, in the cosmological order. Every human action that brings us closer to God is a *tikkun*, a small act of repair, and enough of these restorations of divine order accumulated over time can eventually lead us to a perfected world—*tikkun olam*.

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All of these aspects of *tikkun* share the essential tenet that human action makes a difference. I believe we are so accustomed as Reform Jews to the social justice banner of *tikkun olam* that we often fail to see the startling audacity of this claim and its awesome religious significance and power.

To show you what I mean, let's return to the Starfish Story. Michael Brown, the co-founder of my service program, City Year, based his story off a few pages of an essay by Loren Eiseley. Eiseley was a humanistic scientist (or, if you prefer, a scientific humanist), a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who was a powerful and prolific writer. An essay of Eiseley's is called "The Star Thrower," and it depicts an old man who tosses vulnerable starfish into the ocean. The narrator of the story—asks old man, "Do you collect?"

> "Only like this," he said softly, gesturing amidst the wreckage of the shore. "And only for the living." He stooped again, oblivious of my curiosity, and skipped another star neatly across the water. "The stars," he said, "throw well. One can help them."[3]

Concluding here would leave us aligned with Michael Brown's uplifting version of the story, albeit without the saccharine innocence of the "little girl" satisfyingly winning over the cynical old man. But that's not where Eiseley's story ends. He continues:

> He looked at me with a faint question kindling in his eyes, which seemed to take on the far depths of the sea.
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> "I do not collect," I said uncomfortably, the wind beating at my garments. "Neither the living nor the dead. I gave it up a long time ago. Death is the

[3] *The Star Thrower* (1978), p. 172. (Republication of the essay "The Star Thrower" (1969).)

> only successful collector." … I nodded and walked away, leaving him there upon the dune….
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> I turned as I neared a bend in the coast and saw him toss another star, skimming it skillfully far out over the ravening and tumultuous water. For a moment, in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had, at any rate, the posture of a god.[4]

In Eiseley's telling, the protagonist walks away from the lonely old man, leaving him to his Quixotic task of helping an impossibly large number of creatures. And though this version probably makes us more sad—possibly even uncomfortable, angry, or annoyed—it's also probably more true. How often do we see someone acting out of grace or compassion or altruistic love and simply admire them without seeking to adopt their approach to the world? How often are we like Eiseley's speaker, who acknowledges what may be good but fails to summon the courage to act on it? The concept of *tikkun* is a magnificent moral category that challenges us to take action even when it seems hopeless, and the easiest thing to do is walk away.

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But we shouldn't walk away.

Every week, we have the opportunity to remind ourselves that *tikkun* is not a fantasy. The Kabbalat Shabbat section of our service is a regular reminder of the power and the possibility of *tikkun*, of the astounding capacity humans possess to make our world a better place. And Shabbat itself, as a capstone of creation, is meant to be a taste of the World to Come, a reminder on earth of the heavenly realm we can strive for the rest of the week. Whether you prefer the idealistic retelling of the Starfish Story or the hard-nosed original, you can still walk away with a similar message: We *can* make a difference in the world, even if we act alone. What we do matters.

As the prayer and community we treasure on Shabbat linger with us the rest of the week, let us remember the inspirational wisdom of the made-up little girl: "I made a difference to that one."

[4] *Ibid*.