

## Tikkun Olam

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Jewish mysticism, this light is hidden in the Torah: Whenever a person studies the Torah with great concentration, a ray of the primordial light will illuminate both the Torah and the person, reflecting his/her new understanding of it.

In the Ari's myth, the primordial light God sent forth on that first day is the same light scattered around our world as holy sparks, which each of us is called upon to seek out and gather.

### **How do we go about finding and gathering these mysterious, elusive sparks?**

The Ari explained that the sparks are raised up whenever the Torah is studied or one of God's commandments is fulfilled. This is a radical explanation of why we perform the *mitzvot*. Whereas before these rituals and prayers were regarded purely as God's commandments, the Ari now attributed a beneficial spiritual effect to them: Studying the Torah as well as observing its laws and partaking in all other devotional

and loving acts are the means to gather the sparks, and thus engage in the great *mitzvah* of *tikkun olam*.

### **How might the Ari's life have influenced his interpretations?**

The Ari lived in the 16th century, not long after the expulsions of the Jews from Spain and Portugal. He was well aware of the great dislocation that had followed in the aftermath of that trauma. Jews who for generations had been part of an advanced Sephardic culture on the Iberian Peninsula were suddenly scattered throughout the world, living in foreign and unfamiliar lands. Until they learned of the Ari's myth, many of these exiles found themselves isolated and spiritually bereft. The notion of *tikkun olam* brought them almost immediate consolation and a sense of purpose by explaining why God had dispersed them—to gather the holy sparks that had fallen on these distant lands. Learning that their exile was part of God's plan for *tikkun olam* also raised their hopes for an ingathering of all Jews with the coming of the Messiah. Little wonder that,

within a year of its formulation in the Galilean town of Safed, the Ari's myth had spread throughout the Jewish world.

### **Does the Ari's myth give Jews a special role in the repair of the world?**

The Ari viewed Israel as having a singular destiny based on God's covenant with the Jewish people. However, the idea of God creating humans to remedy a Divine error suggests a more universal meaning: A repaired world can be realized only if the whole of humanity engages in collecting the sparks.

### **Did this myth continue to evolve?**

Yes. Consistent with the ongoing myth-making process in Judaism, after the Ari's death, his teachings, known as Lurianic *kabbalah*, became the leading expression of *kabbalah*, deeply influencing Sephardic and Hasidic mystics. Their commentaries sometimes embellished the Ari's myth. The hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminov (1745–1815), for example, stated that “when the task of gathering the sparks nears completion, God will hasten the arrival of the final redemption by Himself collecting what remains of the holy sparks that went astray.” Later, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943) linked the Ari's myth to a famous midrash about prior worlds that God is said to have created: “At the time of creation, God created worlds and destroyed them. The worlds created and destroyed were the shattered vessels God sent forth. Out of those broken vessels God created the present universe.”

### **How do you account for the continued appeal of tikkun olam?**

The concept of human partnership with God to heal heaven and earth is both engaging and energizing. In a sense, *tikkun olam* expands God's original covenant with the Jews at Sinai by adding a metaphysical and spiritual dimension to our ethical and moral obligations. The Ari was a rare genius who understood the need for a guiding myth for the Jewish people and joined together an array of Jewish legends to create a single, seamless, unifying myth. This myth's integration of mind, body, and spirit has given *tikkun olam* its timeless appeal. □



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