

TIKKUN on Shavuot - The Deeper Meaning
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Blintzes, dairy, cheesecake! These have become the three pillars upon which Shavuot meals and celebrations are based. Add ice cream and you have Or Zarua's favorite dessert after our usual Tikkun Leil Shavuot, the customary Shavuot night learning. Some even stay up all night to learn on this Yom Tov (ice cream for breakfast anyone?) Where does this tradition come from? The injunction to study Torah and engage in Jewish learning on Shavuot is not discussed directly in the Mishnah or the Talmud. In fact, there are no ritual items or set of customs beyond the typical holiday prayers to celebrate Receiving the Torah - *Kabbalat haTorah*. It is not a yom tov with a food like matzah, despite the popularity of aforementioned dairy delights. There's no commandment to eat cheesecake even if the force of our ancestors' minhagim - customs - is just like Jewish law.

Throughout the ages, we have developed a custom of studying late into the night or even all night on Shavuot. This learning reflects our willing reception of the Torah. It further reflects the midrashic understanding that each person received the Torah according to his or her own strength (see Exodus Rabbah and Devarim Rabbah). As individuals learn and ask our own questions, develop our own understandings and explore the meaning of Torah for our own live, the Sinai experience is in some way re-lived and updated. Our study as a community on Shavuot has come to be known as Tikkun Leil Shavuot, a Tikkun for the evening and night of Shavuot.

Why do we use this term Tikkun? When did we start to see it used for this purpose?

In his article on the Shavuot tikkun in the Jerusalem Post, Educator Aharon Wexler wrote:

As for the precedence for staying up all night – Philo of Alexandria records a custom of the Essenes staying up all night praying. The Zohar claims this is an old custom, and Philo and the Dead Sea Scrolls give credence to that; but in Rabbinic literature there is no real mention of a Tikkun Leil Shavuot before the Zohar.

Professor Meir Bar-Ilan claims that while there were Palestinian Amoraim who stayed up the night of Shavuot, they did not remain up all

night. Nor is the custom mentioned in the Shulhan Aruch. This leaves the Lurianic kabbalists with the credit for creating a whole industry of Torah learning that night.

Our Shavuot Tikkun is more related to the spirit of the verb and its use in our Tanakh. than it is to the use of tikkun in either the Talmud or in modernity. And there is a connection to the spirit in which the Lurianic Kabbalists of the 16th Century saw their night of learning and commitment to Torah study in general.

In the Tanakh, the word “tikkun” is usually translated as “make straight” or “straighten out” and more metaphorically “to demystify.” According to tradition, King Solomon suggests a way to relate to the many mysteries that God stitched into creation and that unfold in history. Only God “makes straight” crooked paths! Or, to suggest a wise way of approaching life: do not believe that you can unravel and “straighten out” the mysteries of creation.

There is another way to interpret the verse, on the human plane. Rashi helps us apply the language of “tikkun” to wayward human beings – and our hopes of acting in the Divine Image, to help redeem those who were wayward. From Megillat Kohelet (7:13):

יג רְאֵה, אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה
הָאֱלֹהִים: כִּי מִי יוּכַל לְתַקֵּן,
אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ. 13 Consider the work of God, for who
can make that straight, which He hath
made crooked?

Interpreting Rashi’s message: the “He” is read as “he” – a person, in his or her lifetime can walk a straight path or be crooked. Can a Jew “straighten out” – *l’taken* – in this world what another person made crooked during his lifetime? To make a *tikkun* is to redeem another’s soul through making right a wrong. Is that ever possible, for another to step in and set the record straight? Do we have such Godly power? To redeem the one who was amoral and unscrupulous? Might our study of Torah at a TIKKUN help to make straight the bent?

To make men and women wise Solomon explains that Kohelet (12:9) “taught the people knowledge; for he weighed and sought out and set in order (תקן)

many proverbs.” Here the verb *tikken tav/koof/nun* is used to describe a “fixing of a curriculum” – a set of aphorisms, maxims, wisdom teachings and verses that would positively impact seekers of knowledge and wisdom. Teachers could use the material as a curriculum. Groups could gather to learn them. In the next verse (12:10) Kohelet “sought out...words of truth written in proper form.” A *TIKKUN* (n.) was created, a physical scroll, after Kohelet *tikken* (v.) the necessary wisdom in its proper form. Organized purposefully to provide searching Jews a way forward, a *tikkun* (n.) offers us the opportunity to reflect on how to make straight our paths.

And about rectifying wrongs, demystifying the seemingly crooked and redeeming others, the Lurianic Kabbalists pointed out a psycho-spiritual reason for studying on Shavuot. They instituted an all night learning affair to compensate for/make up for/repent for having “slept through” the Torah study they should have engaged in during the year and, moreover, to make a cosmic fix for some who even slept through the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai! They created a ritual, ceremonial and authentic learning event to re-enact the receiving of the Torah. But could they really set straight all that was “bent” – make-up for missed opportunities and “those who were at Sinai as sleepers?”

Instead of *Tikkun Olam* (to fix the world) the *Tikkun* of Shavuot teaches us that fixing ourselves, and improving our moral standings through Torah study is the deeper meaning. *Tikkun Atzmi* – a fixing and mending of one’s waywardness and crookedness is at the heart of the matter.

The *Tikkun* associated with Shavuot is the “fix” we make as we glean meaning and inspiration for our lives from Torah study and Jewish learning. Because the word is so popularly connected with *Olam*, the world, let’s explore in short form the origin of using the term in a cause-related context. The Talmud itself links the word *Tikkun* with the word *Olam*, except there it refers to a legal category. For the sake of communal needs or in the context of a certain halakhic question a new ruling might have been made, to advance harmonious living among neighbors. The phrase appears thirty times in the Talmud in this legal context.

In an article about *Tikkun Olam* as it is used in a modern context, “29 Texts on *Tikkun Olam*” Rabbi David Seidenberg, a leading thinker of the NeoHasidic Movement and an environmental writer and activist, wrote:

The influence of humanism brought the integration of these concepts (sustaining and improving society, communal needs being met and messianic work on the human plane) to its fullest fruition. A fairly complete expression of the idea that *tikkun olam* includes what we think of as social justice can already be found as early as 1797 in Pinchas Hurwitz's *Sefer Habrit*. Full-throated expressions of messianic social justice appear in Zionist writing at least by 1859 (Natan Friedland, *Kos Yeshu'ot*), and this becomes a central motif in Palestine in the thought of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook and Rav Yehuda Ashlag. Youthful socialist pioneers in Palestine even aspired to be "*m'taknei olam*," world-shapers and reformers.

Returning to our Or Zarua Tikkun Leil Shavuot, in this most unique year we gathered on ZOOM to learn Torah even before yom tov began! We prioritize, as a community, an investigation of sacred texts. We await the return of reading full Torah portions from our bimah. We will continue to study the parsha on Mondays, after Shavuot, at 12 noon on Mondays. We will continue our other regular classes and periodic lectures to enrich our experience of Torah not only on Shavuot, but every day. We hope and pray that study will lead us to righteous action, as our Talmud teaches:

Kiddushin 40b

In connection to the mishna's statement about the importance of Torah study, the Gemara relates the following incident: **And there already was an incident in which Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater or is action greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. Everyone answered and said: Study is greater, but not as an independent value; rather, it is greater as study leads to action.**

It is no coincidence that the book that helps Torah readers prepare readings and sofrim (scribes) to write kosher Torahs, mezzuzot and tefillin is called a **Tikkun**. Just as every letter in the Tikkun is essential to create a kosher Torah or prepare a public Torah reading, every Jew is essential among the Jewish People. Each of us has a unique voice, and thus a unique responsibility to reveal the light of Torah of ourselves anew each year at this time. May we enjoy the *simha shel limmud* - the joy of learning, and may our learning lead us to make

more holy contributions to each others' lives, our community, our country and our world.

Hag Sameah! And Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Bolton