



Tikkun Olam: Healing the World

I realize that in the four years I have been writing this column for the B'nai Jacob newsletter, this is the first time I am writing about one of the chief tenets of our faith – *Tikkun Olam* – the principle of healing, or repairing, the world. Perhaps because I have recently returned from a ten-day humanitarian field-mission to Africa on behalf of the World Food Program,

the world's largest humanitarian agency, my thoughts about this are heightened and I turn in this month's column to our Jewish responsibility, our obligation, to repairing the world.

The phrase *tikkun olam* can be found in the Mishnah in the phrase '*Mip'nei tikkun ha-olam*', 'for the sake of repairing the world', to indicate that a practice should be followed not because it is required by *Halachah*, biblical law, but because it helps avoid social chaos. The expression *tikkun olam* is also included in the prayer familiar to us all, *Aleinu*: '*L'taken olam b'malkhut Shaddai*', 'to perfect the world under God's sovereignty.'

We all know these are difficult times right here at home. America's economy is in shambles, and the developed world is not far behind us. Many of our families and friends have fallen on hard times with job layoffs, shrunken pensions and 401(K)'s, our retirement savings decimated, and reduced employment opportunities, as well. The hard work of putting Americans back to work is ahead of us, and we must all strive to be sensitive to those who are facing difficulty during these times.

Our Jewish community federations, through their Vocational Services agencies, as well as Family Services, are there to assist where necessary. But each of us has the capacity to do our share. Even if we are living on fixed incomes, a portion of that income, however small, should be set aside to help others in need.

Traveling to Ethiopia and Kenya, and observing some of the poorest people in our world, has allowed me to recalibrate what is 'enough'. In many ways, we, here in America, in spite of the difficult times of today, are fortunate enough to have the best healthcare anywhere in the world, food on the shelves in our supermarkets, and daily bread available to feed just about everyone. I spent time in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia observing a Supplementary Feeding Program for Pregnant and Lactating Mothers and Children under 5 deemed to be malnourished and suffering from the HIV-Aids virus. The women are educated to proper nutrition and bring their rations of corn-soy blend (CSB) and cooking oil home on their donkeys, sometimes traveling many miles on foot to get there.

I also visited a number of schools where I participated in special feeding programs held in rural schools. These school feeding programs provide children with a meal they would otherwise not have at all. The very meal provides the incentive for the children to come to school. Living on lands of denuded forests, suffering from drought season after season, and subject to the vicissitudes of political upheavals, these people have daily challenges that one cannot imagine until one sees it first hand. As American taxpayers, we should be proud that our nation provides the largest dollar value of food aid than any nation in the world.

I was in Nairobi, Kenya during the inauguration of Presi-

dent Obama. Given that his father is a Kenyan, you can just imagine how inspired an entire population has become!

But the Kenyans suffer as the Ethiopians and other third world countries do, facing the same challenges of poverty, disease, drought and political upheavals. Traveling through the slums of Kibera, with a population of 1 million people, seeing the wasted lives and piles of garbage, hope springs eternal with the school feeding provided by the World Food Program and its many implementing organizations like Care, Save the Children and many others too numerous to mention.

The AMPATH program in Eldoret, a joint venture of Indiana University and Moi University, started only six years ago, now serves 20,000 people. And the internal displaced persons camp (IDP), set up on an emergency basis following the post-election violence in early 2008, gives a roof over the heads of people chased off their own land during that time of turmoil.

Perhaps the most humbling site I visited was some 50 kilometers from the Somalia border, where I observed some 250,000 Somalian refugees receiving foods provided by the World Food Program. Sadly, since they have been there for many years, their lives of poverty are institutionalized, but I did see some glimmers of hope.

There are some schools where children are learning, smiles and laughter abound, and, thanks to the World Food Program, stomachs are filled with the calories needed for the children to have the energy to learn, thanks to the generosity of others.

And it is important for us to be mindful of two Jewish agencies whose mission is also dedicated to helping the most needy and hungry around the world: Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger and the American Jewish World Service. Both of these organizations are committed to providing millions of dollars annually to the neediest on the planet through allocations to organizations delivering health and human services and food globally. They both have major websites and I urge you to consider making donations to both organizations, as well as the Friends of the World Food Program, where I serve as a board director.

In this season of Purim, we are reminded of the imperative in *Megillat Esther* that on Purim we must 'send gifts to the poor' - *mattanot le'evyonim* 9:22. In fact, according to Maimonides, it is desirable to moderate our *mishlo'ach manot* (at least two types of ready-to-eat food to one person) so as to increase that which we give for *mattanot le'evyonim* (gifts to the poor).

My visit to Africa was a sobering and saddening experience. It has taught me once again the lesson of plenty we have in America. And it has reminded me once again of two important Jewish principles: the first, of course, our responsibility of *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, caring enough to work in whatever way we can to make the world a better place for all. And the second principle, articulated in *Pirkei Avot* (2.16): "It is not incumbent upon us to finish the task, but neither are we free to desist from it altogether." Thus, I encourage each and every one of us to seek ways in our lives to improve the lives of others.

I wish you all a Happy Purim and a Zissen Pesach!

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5 Adar, 5769 / March 1, 2009