



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Rosh Hashanah Partners in Creation

How to Use this Publication

From the Sources is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to learn and ask, teach and engage, act and facilitate.

- **Invite others to learn with you.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises. This can be an excellent opportunity to learn with your family, a group of friends or one-on-one.
- **Use From the Sources for your own learning.** Either for the sake of learning or in own preparation for a Dvar Torah or sermon, this resource aims to invite new thinking.
- **Use From the Sources to teach.** Invite students or participants to share in this learning. By reviewing the material ahead of time you and photocopying From the Sources for your students, you will be able to work through the texts, opening the questions up for discussion. You can also invite students to take action steps after the learning session in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.

Introduction

Many people involved in Jewish social justice find inspiration in the language of *tikkun olam*, viewing the completed world as a broken vessel in need of repair. According to one traditional reading of *tikkun olam*, Jews ought to seek out injustices and rectify them in order to restore the world to an idealized perfect state.

The *tikkun olam* narrative is a powerful and meaningful motivation for justice, but Jewish tradition also offers another story: perhaps the world is not broken, but rather is imperfect because the process of creation is not yet complete. According to this account, our task is to imagine what could be and act to bring the present closer to a future of completeness and peace.



According to Jewish tradition, the world was born on Rosh Hashanah. **היום הרת עולם** – “Today the world was created,” we recite as part of the Rosh Hashanah service, evoking the biblical six days of creation. At the end of those six days, the Torah recounts that God rested: “And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work that God *created to do*.” The biblical commentator Nahmanides, in the first text below, suggests that even today, the world is in the process of creation and remains incomplete.

<p>רמב"ן על בראשית פרק ב פסוק ג ודע, כי נכלל עוד במלת "לעשות" כי ששת ימי בראשית הם כל ימות עולם</p>	<p>Nahmanides on Genesis 2:3 And know that there is more encompassed in the words “to do,” for the six days of creation are akin to the days of the existence of the world.</p>
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- What are some possible implications of Nahmanides interpretation for how we live now?
- How do you imagine the work of creation ought to be divided between God and humanity?

<p>תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף י עמוד א כל דיין שדן דין אמת לאמיתו אפילו שעה אחת - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו נעשה שותף להקדוש ברוך הוא במעשה בראשית.</p>	<p>Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 10a Every judge who judges with complete fairness, even for a single hour, tradition gives him credit as though he had become a partner to the Holy One, blessed be God, in the creation.</p>
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- Why might fairness of judgment be related to partnership with God in the creation of the world?
- Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of our standing in judgment before God, while this text asserts that we stand as partners with God when we judge fairly. What implications might this have for our own repentance during this time?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, p.105

When man, the crowning glory of the cosmos, approaches the world, he finds his task at hand – the task of creation. He must stand on guard over the pure, clear existence, repair the defects in the cosmos, and replenish the “privation” in being. Man, the creature, is commanded to become a partner with the Creator in the renewal of the cosmos; complete and ultimate creation – this is the deepest desire of the Jewish people... Just as the Almighty constantly refined and improved the realm of existence during the six days of creation, so must man complete that creation and transform the domain of chaos and void into a perfect and beautiful reality.

- How does Soloveitchik imagine the work of creation ought to be divided between God and humanity? How is this similar and/or different from the way Nahmanides sees this division of labor?
- According to Soloveitchik, what is our task and what are the principles to guide us in this work?
- This text imbues people with a tremendous amount of power. How do you understand the idea that human action can repair the cosmos?
- In very practical terms, what do you think are the characteristics of the “domain of chaos and void” that distinguish it from a “perfect and beautiful reality”? What are some of the tangible obstacles that prevent us from completing the act of creation? What is one concrete step you are willing to take this year to bring the world closer to that ideal?

Robert Kennedy, quoting George Bernard Shaw

Some people see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not?

- How does this passage reflect on the tension between the *tikkun olam* way of looking at the world and the “partners in creation” way of looking at the world?
- Which of those two ways of looking at the world do you prefer and why?

Conclusion

In seeing the world as a broken article, the task of fixing it seems impossible. To work against the way things are and overturn what is, often comes with a sense of paralysis. Nahmanides' interpretation of the account in Genesis, and the texts from the Talmud and *Halakhic Man*, imply that God is no longer creating alone. The ongoing work of creation requires our participation. In the book of Hosea, in language of commitment that echoes throughout the High Holiday liturgy, God reminds us of the nature of that partnership: "I will betroth you to me with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy."

During the *aseret y'mai teshuvah* – the ten days of repentance, when tradition teaches that the gates of heaven are open and we can influence our fate through acts of goodness, let us seek out opportunities to strengthen our participation in the creation of a world of righteousness, justice and mercy.

For more information on this and other educational resources from the AJWS Education Department, please contact Sarah Margles at smargles@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/holidays. AJWS is preparing a catalogue of holiday teaching guides for the Jewish calendar.

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