

Tikkun Olam: Repair the World, One Kind Act at a Time

With notable exceptions, Christian hymns and choruses (especially contemporary choruses) and even a good share of theology and biblical interpretation dwell on the might of God, the power of God, the deliverance of God from oppression of all sorts. These claim that the world is repaired through acts of power, might, wonderful, observable, delivering movements of God's mighty arm. Yet Scriptural stories and metaphors reveal another side to God, the God who is broken with the broken, the people of God who rescue through small acts of kindness. This is the way to repair the world, *Tikkun Olam*, one act of kindness at a time, even and especially while broken and suffering.

While, repairing the world, God's suffering people mirror the tortured and dying Christ, Hagar, and the wandering family in Genesis, the enslaved Israelites, the Levite's concubine, the obedient prophets, the exiled Jews, and Job. Many other Scripture passages and examples from history show the strength of divine and human compassion, and the strength of the weakness of God and ourselves. Hymns and choruses, sermons and scholarship must commend the compassionate God who suffers with refugees, the imprisoned, the ill, and those without accolades for the kindness they show to others. I affirm here, with Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, that humans and God together repair the world one act of kindness at a time.

We are thus encouraged us to reform, transform, and revive our families, friends, colleagues, and local and global communities in small interpersonal and larger structural ways. We can do this both with *and without* the means to change social structures that cause and perpetuate evil and injustice. Is not the cup of cold water, the smile, the thank you, as significant as the dangerous rescue of over a dozen young boys in watery caves? God's people are called to be heroes in both private and public ways.

In Scripture, the small salvific acts gave birth to more dramatic ones, as they do today. Someone who could midwife God's people, Moses, was first saved when midwives—slaves—refused to kill newborn males, then by another enslaved woman who rejected orders to drown her son, but instead made a small ark and lined it with pitch to protect him. She got her hands dirty. Another enslaved female, perhaps only a girl, set the little ark in the reeds and used her wits to get yet another woman—an Egyptian, someone with far more status in that society—to draw baby Moses out of the water to raise him (Exod 2). Moses could save others as he himself had been saved—he often used his voice to persuade God not to destroy the rest of Israel.

A revised version might be of Hebrews 11: "By faith Shiprah and Puah, Jochebed and Miriam were not afraid of the king's edict and preserved the lives of babies at great risk to themselves, putting Moses in the hands of the king's daughter, who also defied his order and raised the Hebrew child in her own home. By faith, Zipporah was not afraid, when the LORD tried to kill her husband, and took the flint to circumcise her son to save Moses' life." Moses was saved from death at the hand of the I AM, YHWH, who called him to rescue Israel, by a Midianite woman, his wife. Maybe this event in Exod 4 had less to do with circumcision than with another rescue of the rescuer. Moses was impressed once again that he was alive because of mercy shown to him, even when he was endangered by God. His family preserved his life repeatedly. Moses owed his life to others, to the women of his family—all of them. As the story unfolds, we learn that Moses became just as determined to save Israel—even from the LORD,

who heard their cries and acted to rescue them by calling Moses. Moses became just as tenacious in saving Israel throughout his entire life as his women relatives had been in saving him. No males are ever depicted as making an effort to save Moses. Moses could repair his world and the lives of his people, because courageous women made hard and unusual moves things to save him.

The children of Israel in the wilderness were not only endangered by Pharaoh, Egyptian taskmasters and soldiers, or thirst and hunger, or the Amalekites, Sihon, Og, or assimilation into Moab. They were endangered by the LORD's reaction to their faithlessness. They were threatened by YHWH! (Exod 32, Num 13-14). Yet repeatedly, Moses rescued them; he convinced God to withdraw, to move to a different plan that did not involve creating a new people out of Moses. He proclaimed his solidarity with Israel, just as the women, Levite, Egyptian, and Midianite, innovatively ensured his survival. These kindnesses to Moses may seem small in relations to mighty signs and wonders God and Moses performed to impress the Egyptian rulers, but they were intimately a part of the acts that preserved many people alive. Many such stories populate Scripture to help us remember that it is not about fireworks, thunder, and earthquakes, or battles with the sun standing still, although such might have their uses. Stories throughout Scripture continue in this vein, challenging us to consider how to go and do likewise.

Another woman, a Sidonian, saved Elijah at severe risk to her own and her son's lives. Recall that the Gospel of Luke conveys how well Jesus' neighbors thought of him when he was called up to read Torah, that is until he brusquely reminded them of two stories in their Scriptures about God using outsiders, a Sidonian widow and Naaman the Syrian general whose deliverance began with a young Israelite girl. After reading the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus said: "I assure you that there were many widows *in Israel* in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon" This did not go over well (Luke 4:16-30).

Clearly, the LORD was no respecter of culture, ethnicity, or race, addressing this Sidonian widow with orders to feed His prophet, but receivers of Scripture are accustomed to this. (The outsider to Israel was not an outsider to God's ways and was regularly a model of faith and wits: Tamar in Gen 38; Jethro in Exod 2, 4, and 18; Rahab in Josh 2-8; Uriah in 2 Sam 11, and etc.). The widow obeyed. Elijah started small, asking only for water, which she did not resist and started to find him some. This signaled to Elijah that this was the same widow referred to him by the LORD. From her point of view, she recognized him as the stranger the LORD had commanded her to feed. Imagine her consternation upon first hearing the word of the LORD, the God of Israel! The LORD fully expected her to comply with His command, in spite of her great poverty, and the fact that she was not from Israel or Judah, the lands of God's people. Then Elijah further requested bread. Presumptuously, but necessarily, Elijah asked the poor widow with a fatherless son to make him bread and bring it to him first, before making bread for her son and herself. He introduced his request with: "Do not be afraid." and a promise from the LORD as an oracle. Her jar of flour and her jug of oil would not run dry until rain came. He promised that the LORD would indeed send rain to her land, the LORD, the God of Israel! This foreign woman, this outsider to Israel, became the means by which God sustained Elijah during the

remainder of the drought.¹ Thus, we see LORD's provisions in Phoenicia, in the region of Sidon, at Zerephath. The LORD provided for this widow, who recognized and obeyed the word of the LORD to feed a stranger over her own family. Later the widow of Zarephath was outraged at her son's death. Elijah was just as outraged and his intervention was not distant or expressed only in words—it was very loud and very physical. Elijah immediately grasped her son and took him up to his own bed. He cried out against the LORD in distress, questioning whether the LORD was the cause of this crisis, this disaster, this great evil, that happened to the woman with whom he stayed.² As a result of her son's return to life, and, like the Midianite Jethro in Exod 18:11, the Sidonian widow confessed: "**now I know.**" Receivers of the text know, as the widow did, that Elijah was a man of God, and God responded to prayer. This widow was an outsider to Israel who proclaimed the power of Yahweh, based on physical manifestations of God's work.

Like the women who physically, messily, handled pitch, and reeds, and mud, and knives and blood when they intervened to save Moses, so Elijah's physical acts saved the Sidonian widow's son. Elisha operated in a similar earthy, physical manner to redeem widows and ax heads. The destitute Israelite widow of one of the prophets from a community of prophets saw Elisha as a source of help. No one in her prophetic community had helped her save her children from debt slavery (see Exod 21:1-11; Deut 15:12-18). Elisha first asked the widow what *he* could do, but immediately set a plan in motion to help her, similar to Jesus' response to his mother at the wedding of Cana when wine ran out (see John 2:1-12). By borrowing empty vessels, this widow could store the oil that was forthcoming (2 Kgs 4:5-7). Elisha explained how this oil would pay her debts, save her children from slavery, and support them. This widow and orphan story is meant to remind us of the widow in Sidon and Elijah (1 Kgs 17:8-24).

There are so many other biblical stories like this of repairing crises big and small though simple physical acts. Jesus was born to save many when another woman said 'let it be unto me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). Jesus kindly healed his contemporaries by reaching out and touching them, sometimes with mud and spit. He also simply hung out with people, all kinds of people. He was *with* them. This is God's purpose in the creation of Israel and of Christ's church:

¹ When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" 11 As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." 12 "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." 13 Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.' " 1 Kgs 17:10-14). See also 2 Kings 4:1-7 concerning Elisha and a prophet's widow.¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

² 20 Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?"²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"²² The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived.²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

to repair the world by dwelling with us and in us. Culminations of plotlines illustrating God's handiwork throughout Torah and Prophets make this clear. Consider these examples:

Exod 40:33 So Moses finished the work.³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the weight¹ of the Lord filled the tabernacle.³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the weight of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Lev 26:12 And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.¹³ I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

Isa 42:2-4 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Isa 62:12 They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord;" And you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

Ezek 37:27 My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Rev 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

Turning to the New Testament Gospels, we find that Jesus lived among humans as the incarnation of God. Ultimately, Jesus saved all of us by means of his physical suffering. Even though the crucifixion of this one lowly individual was not unusual in Jesus' time, his death was a simple act of offering what he had: his life. God made it effective *for us, for our healing, for our repair and the repair of the world.*

Turning to the twentieth century—a century that still demands repair, and to the Holocaust—the whole burnt offering of millions of people; we find human perpetuated evil, hell day after bloody day, over and over again. We wish we could rewrite history, to apply these words of Charles Wesley's song to those horrible years:

I want an even strong desire,
I want a calmly fervent zeal,
To save poor souls out of the fire,
To snatch them from the verge of hell.

But we cannot. We can, however, see a different face of God than the one that is most often the focus of our praise songs and triumphal preaching. In the book by Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God at Auschwitz*, she highlights God's presence at Auschwitz through prisoners' simple acts of washing, caring, giving.³ In so doing, she creates a theology of suffering. Raphael cautiously, sensitively claims that starving, overworked, abused women embodied the Shekinah, who was and is exiled. The Shekinah of God, who suffers, who does not mind uncleanness, sickness, and the sores and fluids that go with sickness. A God who is not ashamed of secretions, who does not legislate against them, but lives and works among them.

Raphael gives examples of women showing compassion to those even more broken than themselves. Her anecdotes were based upon survivors' stories, but many of these women died at

³ Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Auschwitz. She claims with the survivors that their imitation of God brought God's presence to this hell. She affirms that in small salvific acts such as cleansing the face of a fellow prisoner the face of God appeared. God hands were embodied in a frail woman, who gave her cloak to a colder, more fragile, woman. About another woman, Raphael writes: "her hands are covered in blood and her healing helping presence makes a difference between life and death."

A nameless woman, with hair white as snow, held in her arms a one-year-old child, standing with the rest of her village, at the edge of a pit. She sang to the baby, tickled him under the chin until he laughed, then they were shot.

This God bears little resemblance to a mighty warrior, or to a mountain bellowing clouds of smoke, fire, and thunder. This is not a wholly OTHER God, a numinous, shiny, omnipotent, glowiness. This theophany is an embodied presence of tears, wailing, of offering a worn blanket, a scrap of bread, of a singing, tickling mother, who set her own fears aside for the sake of another. God was in the midst of everyday struggles even in such a hell as Auschwitz. This was the difference between a living God and an absent God. God moved about the camps like a mother unrepelled by vomit, fever, and diarrhea, comforting to the last. She did not turn away from misery. This is a god of all things lowly and disdained by those more taken with a patriarchal, transcendent, distant God of might and power, or to the God who resides in a high and holy place removed from travail, whose representatives are deemed unclean when they contact secretions.

This caring, cleaning, suffering presence is far more like the broken, naked, tortured, crucified Jesus. Like the women in the death camps, Jesus suffered in the midst of vile conditions. Jesus did not call 10,000 angels to deliver him from the cross; he died. The female face of God in the death camps of the twentieth century Europe is far more like the women around Moses, Elijah, Elisha, the Samaritan, and the women who stayed with Jesus, ministered to him, and sought to care for his dead body. The accounts of Scripture mentioned here and those in Raphael's book depict interdependence, not autonomy. Like the savior, the female face of God at Auschwitz was an embodied presence, of tears, of weeping and wailing, washing feet, wounds, wrapping a beloved body, offering a worn blanket, sharing a scrap of bread, enfolding refugees and immigrants.

God forbid that we push away the suffering God or God's suffering people. God raised up Jesus from the dead and healed most of his wounds; God promises us a similar resurrection and heals our diseases; Scripture gives us hope of many sorts of deliverances. Nonetheless, many do not see such deliverance in this age, expecting it in the age to come and we must see God going forward and going on through the Samaritan, the old woman making the baby laugh before they both were shot. The living God of Auschwitz, flood and earthquake victims, immigrants and refugees is a God who survives and gives hope through all kinds of kindness. Women prisoners laying down their lives for others by offering the last scrap of bread is a picture that offers redemption in the face of the most difficult of times and shows how God endured. They show how we also can and must go on after learning hundreds of children have been separated from their parents at borders after making perilous progress to that point; after hearing that a young father of three sons, one a newborn, has a tumor in his pelvis that is growing so fast and causing

so much pain he cannot lift his head from the bed. Can we consider the acts of kindness we can show, including prayer that will bring God's presence and redemption?

We go on because we affirm mercy and kindness is possible, doable. Justice will come while we work and through our work. We go on, because like Peter, we have no place else to go. We have thrown our lot in with Jesus and with the world he saved by offering up his one life, the only life he had to give. We pick particulars; we focus on a few in order to care about the many. As Wesleyans we know we cooperate with God and give God our very best as we obey and take tiny steps, day by day, as we are kind and merciful and bring great and small deliverances.