



## Tikkun Olam: Collectivity, Responsibility, History A Qualitative Study of *Tikkun Olam* Among Jewish Community Workers in Greater Vancouver

Alex Leslie

Volume 33, numéro 2, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038703ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038703ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

### ISSN

2369-5757 (numérique)

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### Citer cet article

Leslie, A. (2016). Tikkun Olam: Collectivity, Responsibility, History: A Qualitative Study of *Tikkun Olam* Among Jewish Community Workers in Greater Vancouver. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, 33(2), 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038703ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Le présent article expose les résultats d'entrevues qualitatives menés auprès de cinq personnes juives – deux rabbins et trois femmes qui travaillent à divers titres dans des services communautaires – au sujet de ce qu'ils savent du principe juif de *tikkun olam* et de la façon dont ils le mettent en pratique. Ce principe, dont le nom vient de l'hébreu et signifie « réparation du monde », trouve son origine dans la loi rabbinique, la kabbale et la prière Aleinu. L'expression *tikkun olam* est devenue courante pour désigner les efforts de justice sociale et la contribution communautaire des Juifs en Amérique du Nord après la Shoah (holocauste). Dans la présente étude, les participants ont parlé de la nécessité d'agir et du sentiment de responsabilité qui les habitent; de *tikkun* externe et de *tikkun* interne; de collectivité et d'interconnexion; de la présence de l'histoire juive dans leur travail, particulièrement dans le cas de l'holocauste; et de la dimension spirituelle du travail auprès des gens. L'étude a été menée dans une approche descriptive, pour honorer et préserver les connaissances des communautés juives entourant le *tikkun olam*. Elle montre que ce principe continue à avoir de l'influence tant au sein de la communauté juive qu'à l'extérieur. De futures recherches pourraient porter sur le rôle de la spiritualité dans l'engagement des travailleurs sociaux à l'égard de la justice sociale et sur la volonté exprimée par plusieurs participants de travailler avec les Autochtones vu le vécu du génocide culturel qu'ils partagent.

# TIKKUN OLAM: COLLECTIVITY, RESPONSIBILITY, HISTORY

## A Qualitative Study of *Tikkun Olam* Among Jewish Community Workers in Greater Vancouver

*Alex Leslie*

**Abstract:** This paper presents findings from qualitative interviews with five Jewish people — two Rabbis and three workers in various community service capacities — about their understandings and practices of the Jewish principle of *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* is a Hebrew phrase that means “the repair of the world,” has its roots in Rabbinic law, the Kabbalah and the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer, and became a mainstream term for Jewish social justice work and community contribution in North America following the Shoah (Holocaust). In this study, participants spoke to the imperative to act and responsibility; external *tikkun* and internal *tikkun*; collectivity and interconnectedness; the presence of Jewish history in their work, particularly in the case of the Holocaust; and the spiritual dimension of working with people. This study was undertaken with a narrative approach, to honour and preserve understandings of *tikkun olam* across Jewish communities. This study indicates the continuing influence of *tikkun olam* in settings both within and outside the Jewish community. Potential future areas of research are the role of spirituality in social workers’ commitment to social justice and the commitment expressed by several participants to work with Aboriginal people based on a shared history of cultural genocide.

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*Alex Leslie graduated from the Masters in Social Work program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2015. This article placed first among English submissions to the journal’s 2015 Student Competition. This research was completed as part of satisfying the research course requirements in the Masters of Social Work program at UBC. The author acknowledges the contributions of her classmates and the guidance of the course instructor, Vaughan Marshall (Ph.D.), throughout the conceptualization and process of this research.*

Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 33, Number 2 (2016) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 33, numéro 2 (2016)

**Keywords:** Tikkun olam, spirituality, social work, Jewish philosophy, Holocaust

**Abrégé :** Le présent article expose les résultats d'entrevues qualitatives menés auprès de cinq personnes juives – deux rabbins et trois femmes qui travaillent à divers titres dans des services communautaires – au sujet de ce qu'ils savent du principe juif de *tikkoun olam* et de la façon dont ils le mettent en pratique. Ce principe, dont le nom vient de l'hébreu et signifie « réparation du monde », trouve son origine dans la loi rabbinique, la kabbale et la prière Aleinu. L'expression *tikkoun olam* est devenue courante pour désigner les efforts de justice sociale et la contribution communautaire des Juifs en Amérique du Nord après la Shoah (holocauste). Dans la présente étude, les participants ont parlé de la nécessité d'agir et du sentiment de responsabilité qui les habitent; de *tikkoun* externe et de *tikkoun* interne; de collectivité et d'interconnexion; de la présence de l'histoire juive dans leur travail, particulièrement dans le cas de l'holocauste; et de la dimension spirituelle du travail auprès des gens. L'étude a été menée dans une approche descriptive, pour honorer et préserver les connaissances des communautés juives entourant le *tikkoun olam*. Elle montre que ce principe continue à avoir de l'influence tant au sein de la communauté juive qu'à l'extérieur. De futures recherches pourraient porter sur le rôle de la spiritualité dans l'engagement des travailleurs sociaux à l'égard de la justice sociale et sur la volonté exprimée par plusieurs participants de travailler avec les Autochtones vu le vécu du génocide culturel qu'ils partagent.

**Mots clés :** *Tikkoun olam*, spiritualité, travail social, philosophie juive, holocauste

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*

–Hillel (Pirkei Avot 1:14)

*THIS STUDY FOCUSES ON THE JEWISH PRINCIPLE* of *tikkun olam*, a Jewish principle of spiritual repair and social justice meaning “repair of the world” in Hebrew. In Vancouver, many diverse Jewish community groups, ranging from synagogue committees to Jewish social service agencies, cite *tikkun olam* as a core principle. In spite of its pervasiveness, there is a dearth of literature on how *tikkun olam* is understood and carried out by Jewish community workers in both secular and Jewish contexts.

In his essay “*Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept*,” Gilbert S. Rosenthal (2005) presents a historical review of *tikkun olam*, stating that, currently, the “term has become synonymous with social activism” (p. 214). Rosenthal begins his historical review with the verb “t-k-n” which appears in the book Koholet (Ecclesiastes), a verb that

means “to straighten, to repair, to fashion” and which in rabbinic Hebrew “assumes many meanings and, in fact, becomes *one of the most flexible verbs* in the language” (p. 215, my emphasis). *Tikkun olam* next appears in the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer in third century CE, the prayer recited three times daily by Orthodox Jewish people. Rosenthal identifies the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer as crucial to the evolution of *tikkun olam* because it invests the principle with divine action rather than human action. In her essay “Repairing the World from the Perspective of Jewish Tradition,” Lee (1990) cites the centrality of the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer in Jewish religious life, writing that “the idea of ‘repair of the world’ is an ever present notion for Jews since they conclude every worship service with the ‘*Aleinu*’ prayer” (p. 402).

*Tikkun olam* next appears in the Kabbalah, also known as “the Secret Wisdom,” also known as Qabbalah or Cabbalah, Hebrew for “that which has been received” and is said to have been brought to Earth by the prophet Elijah (Unterman, 2008, xxv). In his essay “Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought,” Fine (1989) writes that in diverse ways, from popular piety to the arena of theological speculation, Lurianic Kabbalah greatly impacted Judaism in the 17th century and well into the 18th century among Eastern European Jewry. The popular website *My Jewish Learning* offers this standard condensed version of Luria’s teaching of *tikkun olam*, the version often taught to Jewish children: “Divine light became contained [by G-d] in special vessels, or *kelim*, some of which shattered and scattered. While most of the light returned to its divine source, some light attached itself to the broken shards. These shards constitute evil and are the basis for the material world; their trapped sparks light give them power.”

In her essay about the role of Judaism in her social work practice, Dalhousie social work professor Merlinda Weinberg (2010) summarizes Lurianic Kabbalism without naming Luria or the Kabbalah:

In Jewish mysticism, there is a story that G-d attempted to fill a vessel (which represented order in the universe) with celestial light. The vessel shattered so that humans entered a broken world in which sparks of the divine were present. An essential responsibility is to use our own G-d-given radiance to gather up the broken bits through *Tikkun Olam* or repair of the world (p. 134).

The commonalities in synopses of the story of *tikkun olam* are of searching out dispersed light, the coexistence of light and dark, and the human work of correcting for disruption in the world.

The *tikkun olam* of ‘*Aleinu*’ and the Kabbalah share the importance of daily acts of spiritual devotion in the pursuit of repair. Lee (1990) writes of ‘*Aleinu*’ that “humans advance the cause of restoration through daily acts of study, prayer, and the performance of commandments” (p. 406). This focus on the ability of individuals to perform broader spiritual repair

could account for the popularity of *tikkun olam* following the Shoah, the Hebrew word for the Holocaust. *Tikkun olam* resurfaced in the mid-20th century. Prior to this, Rosenthal (2005) writes *tikkun olam* disappeared except in Kabbalistic circles.

Rosenthal outlines the contribution of Emil Fackenheim, the Rabbi and philosopher who devoted much of his work to introducing the concept of *tikkun olam* into Jewish philosophy. Rosenthal (2005) describes Fackenheim's message that "Jews must rebuild even if *tikkun* is fragmentary, precarious and incomplete" (p. 235). Fine (1989) writes: "the notion of an ontological rupture and shattering — which stands at the heart of Lurianic mysticism — has the capacity to strike a deeply sympathetic chord in a generation which experienced the destruction of European Jewry" (p. 52). Here is the suggestion that *tikkun olam* rose to prominence because it gave North American Jewish communities a story in which to ground spiritual action and community contribution after the Shoah. In *To Mend the World*, Emil Fackenheim (1982) puts the Shoah in the context of the history of Jewish persecution and exile:

After 585 B.C.E. and again after 70 C.E., the children of Rachel went into exile; at Ravensbruck and Auschwitz, they were drowned in buckets and thrown into the flames. For centuries the kabbalists practiced their *Tikkun*...in the Holocaust their bodies, their souls and their *Tikkun* were all indiscriminately murdered. No *Tikkun* is possible of that rupture, ever after. *But the impossible Tikkun is also necessary* (p. 254, my emphasis).

In Fackenheim's formulation, *tikkun olam* is a confrontation of the abyss produced by genocide, a form of meaning-making and of spiritual defiance.

The issue of spirituality in social work has been widely discussed. Mari Ann Graham, Tamara Kaiser, and Kendra J. Garrett (1998) write: "the spiritual dimension of practice is inherent in the nature of the social work relationship and in many of the issues clients bring" (p. 50). They make the claim that "many practitioners have been engaging clients in [a spiritual search] *without having a professional language for talking about it*" (p. 54, my emphasis). In his essay "Exploring the Spiritual Dimension of Social Work," Michael McKernan (2005) writes that while "social work and psychology have been reckoning with human experience for a little over a century, spiritual traditions [...] have been refining their grasp of the cosmos and human healing for millennia" (p. 94-95). Wagler-Martin (2005) writes: "exploring spirituality in the context of clinical work reminds social workers that most, if not all, people have beliefs about the nature of the world, humanity, and how they themselves personally find a place..." (n.p.). Given these current conversations about the impact of spirituality on social work practice, an investigation of *tikkun olam* is a timely project.

My motivation for studying *tikkun olam* is rooted in my family history. In his essay “Ghostly Landscapes: Soviet Liberators Photograph the Holocaust,” David Shneer (2014) writes that Auschwitz became the recognized symbol of the Shoah because Auschwitz survivors were the most numerous and vocal, but that a representation of the Shoah limited to death camps “conceals as much as it reveals” because genocide takes place less often in iconic locations such as concentration camps and more often “in mundane sites of daily existence” (p. 236). Shneer focuses on photographs recorded by the Soviet Extraordinary Commissions in the Odessa region of Ukraine, where the Jewish part of my family originated. Images of concentration camps have become part of the Western imagination, but, Shneer writes, the photographs of pits and ravines full of bodies in the Ukraine are unknown, having “no searing, no iconic imagery” (p. 237). Shneer writes that every town in the Ukraine had a ravine (*yar*), pit (*yama*), or trench (*rov*) on its outskirts, where bodies of Jewish people were disposed during the Shoah.

My grandmother, Yetta Apter, was the carrier of this history in my family. As told in my family by my grandmother, her parents came to North America from their *shtetl* (Jewish village) outside Odessa, due to the raids and killings against Jewish people that took place for over a hundred years in that region; these events are known as the *pogroms*. Odessa was declared *Judenrein* (“free of Jews”) during the Shoah, with the population being reduced from over two hundred thousand to scattered pockets of survivors. The Jewish village culture in the Ukraine was destroyed by the Shoah. The volume *Alliance For Murder: The Nazi-Ukrainian Nationalist Partnership in Genocide* (1991) contains testimony by Shoah survivors from the Ukraine, their experiences ranging from witnessing the mass graves of Jews, the deportation of Jewish people to ghettos and concentration camps, and the destruction of the *shtetls*. One survivor, Shenya Bomza, writes that in 1942, when her home village in Ukraine was declared *Judenrein*, this “meant that anyone could kill a Jew whenever he was discovered” (p. 190). In his book *The Holocaust By Bullets*, Father Patrick Desbois (2008) chronicles his work of recording testimonies from non-Jewish witnesses of the Shoah in villages throughout eastern Europe. The witnesses’ accounts recount the systematic execution of the Jewish population of Ukraine, village by village. Across regions, witnesses consistently reported that Jewish people were buried wounded and alive and that “the pit moved for three days” following the execution (p. 97).

My grandmother expressed bitterness and anger about what happened to the Jewish people and to our remaining relatives in our place of origin, yet evaded many details. However, some of my most powerful moments of connection with my grandmother were her conveying the importance of her Jewish identity to me, such as the naming tradition by which she named my father and aunts. When I was a child, while telling

me of when she had her children, she told me that because my father was born in 1944, his birth “ended the Holocaust.” Now that I am aware of the extent of the atrocity in eastern Ukraine during the pogroms and Shoah, in particular the razing of the *shtetl* culture and loss of our relatives, I understand my grandmother’s conflicted messages of pride and silence as an expression of the traumatic nature of the history she both experienced and inherited, the trauma of her parents and their communities of origin, and the effect of the Shoah on her consciousness as a Jewish person and parent. At the time of writing, I am the same age that my grandmother was when the *shtetl* culture was destroyed.

I came to this research with the awareness that the project carried a great deal of emotion for me. I also wished to look beyond my personal experience and learn how healing is understood by Jewish workers from a range of communities. I began with the belief that researching religious and spiritual traditions that affirm the possibilities of human creation of meaning can produce knowledge about human connections to the world, life source, or G-d, that exceed or outlast as genocide and dispossession. I am interested in how historical lessons of both resilience and despair are absorbed into workers’ everyday practices.

As a worker with six years of experience in community work in secular contexts working with marginalized people, I am also interested in how this history has contributed to my own commitment to social justice, including the impact of my grandmother’s incomplete healing. My research question for this project was: What are the constructions of the Jewish principle *tikkun olam* among Jewish community workers in Greater Vancouver?

## Methods

The design of this study sought to honour each participant’s experience of *tikkun olam*. Semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, took place in coffee shops in Greater Vancouver. I used a narrative approach for interviewing, asking questions intended to elicit stories. Both Rabbis I interviewed were invited individually by email, in order to proceed respectfully. The three workers I interviewed were recruited through a research poster, which was distributed to the young adults Facebook group at a local progressive Synagogue, employees at Vancouver Jewish Family Services Agency, and the Jewish Community Centre in Vancouver.

I asked each participant to discuss their personal definition of *tikkun olam* in order for the conversation to be rooted in the participant’s worldview. As the Shoah was discussed by a number of participants, I sought to create safety in the interviews by reciprocating with the story that my grandmother’s family and region of origin were impacted by the Shoah. Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001) write: “the infinitely



differing interpretations, assumptions, and knowledge background of investigators that can potentially influence the research process require a devout attention to integrity and criticality” and I believe this applies in particular when discussing emotionally charged issues (p. 531). I selected the narrative approach with the intention to create conditions for each conversation to unfold on the terms of the participant-narrator. Further, acknowledging that I conducted this work in the context of a secular institution, I wished to respect the spiritual nature of *tikkun olam* and a narrative approach contributed to creating a tone of holding space for ambiguous and ineffable experiences to be shared, rather than seeking concrete answers.

With the intention to be open and attentive to participants’ experiences across a spectrum of Jewish ways of being and knowing, I followed a constructivist approach, as opposed to a phenomenological approach that take as pre-determined a universal essence of Jewish spiritual experience (Creswell, 2012). My approach to sampling fell into the category of illustration/evocation (Mason, 2002) due to the diversity of the Jewish community. My process of analyzing the stories in this study began with transcribing each interview. I began analysis by looking for “categories and relationships,” as described by Maxwell (Maxwell, 2012, p. 105). I sought to establish the connections and repeated ideas among the stories, which established the themes I will discuss.

## Participants

I interviewed five participants who work in the Greater Vancouver area — two Rabbis and three Jewish workers. “Rabbi Persman,” who chose to use a pseudonym for this study, is a Rabbi educated in Hasidic Kabbalism and leader of a Chabad — an Ultra Orthodox synagogue and education centre — located in a suburb of Vancouver. Rabbi David Mivasair, who chose to use his legal name in this study, was the Rabbi for eight years of a progressive Synagogue in East Vancouver, earned a Masters in Social Work prior to attending Rabbinical school, has engaged deeply in inter-faith community work, and worked for several years at a low-barrier homeless shelter in the Downtown Eastside. “Sarah”, who chose to use a pseudonym, is a clinical counseling Masters student at the University of British Columbia currently completing her practicum as a counselor at the Salvation Army, and has worked in palliative care, education, and non-profit community development work in Israel. Jordana, who chose to have only her first name used in this study, is currently a counselor at a Vancouver Jewish private high school and previously worked for eight years as a youth support worker for an agency that serves sexually-exploited youth and as a youth worker for a conservative Vancouver Synagogue. “Rebecca,” who chose use a pseudonym for this study, is an undergraduate student at a BC university working as a peer counselor and



is also a founder of a student support centre for sex, gender, sexuality, and mental health at her university. She self-identified as Queer and as a progressive Jew involved in the Jewish Renewal Movement.

## Results

The results of this study emerged as five themes: imperative to act and responsibility; internal *tikkun* and external *tikkun*; collectivity and interconnectedness; the presence of history in everyday work; and the spiritual dimension of working with people.

### *Imperative to Act and Responsibility*

All participants spoke to the imperative to act and to take responsibility for contributing to the collective. Rabbi Mivasair stated that the imperative to act comes from the Torah, citing “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*” (Deut. 16:20), which translates as “Justice justice thou must pursue.” Rabbi Persman stated: “as a Jewish people we’ve always had that responsibility [to help others] maybe because of being oppressed, but I think it’s bigger than that.” “Rebecca” discussed her Jewish identity as tied to responsibility due to the impact of the Shoah, saying, “there’s a huge responsibility as a child of Judaism to think about how genocides continue, how they exist today,” adding she feels a definite “responsibility to think about (it), as a descendant of trauma supporting other people who are descendants of trauma.”

Jordana defined responsibility as deeply tied to belonging, saying that, “I think that’s where *tikkun olam* happens — I think you want to make that space better for whatever that community looks like *because you belong to it.*” Rabbi Persman articulated this in religious terms, telling me that because the world or *olam* was created with intention, every person has the responsibility to be part of creation and participate in the work of repairing the world. He said: “nobody exists outside of the context of the purpose of existence, we all have a role to play, we all have a responsibility to carry that out.”

Rabbi Mivasair, Rabbi Persman and Jordana stated that part of the responsibility to act is the knowledge that the individual is not always working for tangible “results,” as the timespan of repair may be too long for a person to recognize. Rabbi Mivasair said:

I think the concept of *tikkun olam* teaches us to keep at it, to keep going. Your miniscule efforts are part of something cosmic. That big. We can think back to Isaiah. We’ve been working on it since then. Three thousand, thirty-five hundred years. It might take ten thousand years.

The individual is responsible to the process and to the whole, which belongs to the timespan of history and creation, not of an individual human life.

*Internal Tikkun and External Tikkun*

In participants' stories, *tikkun olam* was described as both internal and external processes, which are simultaneous and interdependent. Rabbi Persman stated that a person cannot stop inner work to pursue work for or with others. To illustrate this, he told me the story of a man who went to his Rabbi and told him that he felt he was not doing tikkun properly because he felt vain about contributing to others. The man's Rabbi responded that the man should try to correct for this but not cease to give in the process. I took this story to mean that it was through doing external tikkun that inner tikkun could happen, by experiencing the interrelation of the two.

"Sarah" described her vision of external and internal tikkun by drawing a diagram of concentric circles, with an individual's tikkun in the innermost circle and the outer circles representing, from smallest to largest: family, Jewish community, general community, and *olam*. The innermost circle of tikkun radiates outward. Rabbi Persman articulated a similar structure, explaining that *tikkun olam* is about *shalom* — peace — and that "peace has many levels," beginning with the individual. He stated: "when people don't get along, families don't get along, countries don't get along, the world doesn't get along." Rabbi Persman agreed with my response that this *tikkun olam* is based in the principle of harmony between the levels. Rabbi Persman defined inner tikkun as including prayer, keeping kosher, and observing Shabbat, the traditional daily practices of Orthodox Judaism.

Rabbi Mivasair spoke to the necessity of inner tikkun connecting to external tikkun in order to achieve its purpose, stating: "if the inner tikkun doesn't lead to some kind of external engagement, then you're missing something. You're doing it wrong." He stated that without practical political application in the world, the work of inner *tikkun olam* is "incomplete," but not meaningless. He expressed his frustration with many Vancouver synagogues, stating they do good work in spreading the message of doing good deeds "and totally fail at the second part," the direct social and political application of *tikkun olam*. He expressed doubt as to whether individual contribution could create systemic change, saying to me: "even within social work there's a big difference between taking someone soup and changing systems or social policies." He also emphasized the importance of inter-faith work and critiqued Jewish communities who practice *tikkun olam* only for Jewish people.

"Rebecca" discussed her work being part of establishing a student support centre for sex, gender, sexuality, and mental health at her progressive university. "Rebecca" explained: "a big part of *tikkun olam* is supporting others in their self discovery." This echoes "Sarah's" message of *tikkun olam* expanding outwards from the individual. Jordana stated that tikkun moves outward but also inward, and that the strength she has

received from others has allowed her to do more work in turn. She said: “the macro definitely affects the micro and the micro definitely affects the macro, nothing in insulation... isolation ...insulation, I guess [laughter].”

She laughed at this verbal slip between *insulation* and *isolation*, an accidental and apt articulation of how the energy exchange between inside and outside is central to *tikkun olam*.

### *Collectivity and Interconnectedness*

*Tikkun olam* was described by all participants as rooted in the principle of interconnectedness. Participants’ examples of *tikkun olam* were of collective experience. Rabbi Mivasair told me the story of inviting Palestinians to speak into his progressive Vancouver synagogue. “Rebecca” provided the examples of participating in the 2013 Walk for Reconciliation in downtown Vancouver, a public gathering and walk of over seventy thousand people that acknowledged the legacy of Indian Residential Schools; and healings in her progressive East Vancouver synagogue.

“Sarah” described *tikkun olam* as “co-created” with others. “Sarah” and “Rebecca” both stated that *tikkun olam* can be done by an individual, but the work is stronger when done by a group. “Sarah” said, “it’s just magnified exponentially when we’re all working together, we’re all holding hands together.” “Rebecca” said that *tikkun olam* takes on a “hive mind” spirit. She described the spiritual experience of being in a room with a group of people who share the same beliefs, as feeling “understood, supported, connected, desired,” adding that “if it’s also other Jews then that adds another layer.” Jordana stated that her personal definition of healing is “giving of yourself to make things better for somebody else, for the greater collective.” Healing is by definition relational.

In describing his Kabbalistic beliefs, Rabbi Persman described the individual’s work of *tikkun olam* as “helping the world achieve its purpose.” He told me a teaching from Hasidic philosophy, that “if we had the ears and ability to hear,” that every time we walked on the ground we would hear the ground shouting at us, asking us why we are stepping on the ground. He explained:

If we stepped on a person, would they say don’t step on me? Why do we think that it’s okay to step on the ground? What right do you have to step on the ground? Unless the ground knows that you’re going to do a *mitvah* [good deed], the ground says, please step on me, this is why I’m here, I want to be part of that purpose too.

He elaborated that in Hasidic teachings “everything is interdependent with each other” and that “everything is in communication.” Further, Rabbi Persman stated that every person, object and part of creation has his, her or its role to play in *tikkun olam* — thus we are all bound together.

“Sarah” gave the example of trees’ root systems to illustrate how “we are all interconnected,” explaining to me that if a tree lacks nutrients, the other trees will extend their roots towards that tree to share nutrients. “Sarah” described interconnectedness as “a universal truth—a given” in her Jewish identity — “*it is what it is.*” We laughed together as she described the “staunch individualism” she has encountered in her university training as a clinical counselor and how it “grates against the core of my being,” a shared experience between us of cultural difference in the secular classroom. She described *tikkun olam* as a crystal, with many faces and angles of light, which is brightest and distributes the most light when everyone polishes the crystal.

### *The Presence of History in Everyday Work*

Jewish intellectual history was present through the stories of Rabbi Mivasair and Rabbi Persman, who drew on teaching stories from their traditions, including Hasidic Kabbalistic teachings and the Mishnah (Rabbi Persman) and the Torah (Rabbi Mivasair). Rabbi Mivasair illustrated the meaning and importance of inviting Palestinians to speak in his Synagogue in Vancouver by telling me the story from the Book of Genesis of Hagar, mother of Ishmael, the patriarch of the Ishmaelites, as a means to explore the figure of the stranger and importance of inviting the stranger inside.

“Rebecca” and Jordana expressed a heightened awareness of the significance of their lives as descendants of European Jewry after the Shoah. “Rebecca” explained to me that when she was growing up, her father was “very fixated” on the Shoah, saying: “I don’t believe that you can be a Jew today without being in the context of a post-Holocaust world.” She added: “if the Holocaust hadn’t happened I don’t think *tikkun olam* would have been such a well-known term — I don’t think I would have been educated in it at all.” This suggests a very strong connection between the legacy of the Shoah and a community-wide return to the principle of “world repair.”

Jordana echoed “Rebecca’s,” words in stating: “I think because we’ve been persecuted for so many years and like for so many thousands of years people have been telling us ‘You can’t do it’ like, fuck you, but you’re not going to tell me that I’m not going to do it now,” and concluded by saying she feels “almost obligated to practice for those who haven’t and I feel really, really connected to the history of the Holocaust and the millions of people who died for being who I am.”

“Rebecca” told me:

I was just telling my mom about this the other night, me being alive as a Jew is, like, a miracle, and people of my grandparents’ generation — my grandparents never thought there would be this many Jews again, that there would ever be this recovery of Judaism, that Judaism was a good

thing, you know that people who ran away from their religion, because, you know, look at what it brought us.

Jordana spoke to the impact of the Shoah on her experiences of working with Aboriginal youth at an agency for sexually exploited youth. She said:

Working so closely with the Aboriginal community, working especially with Onyx, very disproportionately like so many of the kids I was working with were Aboriginal and I feel like the genocide they went through is very similar to the genocide that the Jewish people faced in Europe. But the difference is that we actually had an infrastructure over here that allowed displaced people to come and kind of rebuild. And I see how the Aboriginal culture was completely decimated because they had nowhere to go, nobody to protect them, nowhere to flee to, no other infrastructure anywhere else where they could go back, regroup and rebuild. And when I see how much of Aboriginal culture has been lost and there are these young people who don't know where they come from—and they come from this beautiful long lineage of culture and heritage and tradition—and they're disconnected from it, and have nowhere to go to learn it, because the generations above them and the generations above them, they don't know anything either because it was beaten out of them. And comparing that to the Jewish community with so much infrastructure and the culture that I was literally hit over the head with growing up, we are so, so, so fortunate because it could have happened to us.

Significantly, the Shoah was also present in the research process itself. My conversation with Rabbi Persman took place within a week after the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, which was featured in the news, and so our conversation began with a brief discussion of this — an example of the inseparability of this research process from the ongoing presence of this history and the impact of my subjectivity on the research. In this, I was not separate as a person with Jewish lineage from the process of research. For example, during this exchange, I mentioned to Rabbi Persman that my grandmother had never let go of her anger about what had happened in the Ukraine during the Holocaust and that she had referred to Ukrainians as murderers. He responded that there was also a great deal of fear present in this statement, an important moment of emotional recognition for me.

### *The Spiritual Dimension of Working With People*

Participants had divergent perspectives on the spiritual dimension of working with people in community. “Sarah” shared her belief in the Jewish soul — the neshama in Hebrew — and that “energetically we connect with others, or we don't,” and that interconnectedness plays out

between humans on the level of energy. Due to this energetic exchange, as a worker, she feels strongly that she is the same as her service users on a basic level — “we’re all human.” “Sarah” described having spiritual experiences during the time she did a research project in a palliative care setting, experiences that she stated taught her that human life exceeds physical presence. She described developing awareness that there is “something greater and bigger than what we can conceive” and that the palliative care ward “opened my eyes to things that I may have known but have never seen, known but dismissed, known but never accepted.” This experience of knowing without seeing connects to Rabbi Persman’s Kabbalistic beliefs.

Rabbi Persman shared with me that in his Kabbalistic teachings the root of the word *Olam* means “the concealment,” and that “the world we see is a concealment — what you’re seeing is a concealment of something deeper and more true.” Rabbi Persman said: “the concealment of the world is we don’t see the unifying factor in everything that exists.” This explanation led to a discussion of the intrinsically spiritual nature of having a focused conversation with another human being. Rabbi Persman explained that by seeking to see past physicality, each person can be seen as a spirit or a soul. This way of being present involves setting aside the ego. He said:

Often we can accomplish good things simply by listening, by not being there rather than by being there. Not that you’re not there but that your ego is not there. That’s a *tikkun*.

Thus, in Kabbalistic teachings of *tikkun olam* work with people takes on a spiritual dimension because the worker is responsible for working with both the physical and unseen dimensions of people. Rabbi Persman said that the capacity to see beyond concealment can be developed by all people “to an extent” and only comes after years of dedication and study. “Sarah” stated in her definition of *tikkun olam* that *olam* is “more like my *aleph* – One. I picture it as the earth but we are all the world and also the other thing [*olam*] is.”

Rabbi Mivasair emphasized that inner spiritual work gains expression through action and contribution to others and if spiritual inner work does not lead to outer work, there is a gap that needs to be revisited and filled. This suggests that social justice based in commitment to Jewish spiritual life contains the seeds of inner spiritual work, whether or not the social justice work in the world is described as spiritual in nature.

## Discussion

A principle that emerged from this study is that families and communities impacted by genocide have our own ways of understanding these impacts, through traditions that adapt across generations and groups. *Tikkun olam* was articulated as one response to the Shoah — a sense of profound responsibility to go on and to honour the past through continuing Jewish tradition. This has implications for social work as a field that emphasizes strength-based practice, which contends that practitioners should focus on service users' individual and collective strengths and assets (Saleebey, 1996). Genocide, as a source of understanding of resilience and survival was conveyed by participants— and the direct attachment of this understanding to a personal ethic of responsibility and action in the world.

Greene (2010) describes ways in which the testimonies of Shoah survivors can be used as a tool to educate social work students in resilience theory. Further, Greene (2010) discusses survivors' responses to the Shoah in terms of ecological systems theory, writing that resilience “not only is a process of individual adaptation and coping but applies to large scale social phenomena” (p. 300), a message congruent with participants' understandings of *tikkun* as individual healing inseparable from communal healing. The link between resilience and the lessons of the Shoah has direct implications for social workers in communities impacted by genocide, in particular Aboriginal people in Canada. Fleming and Ladogar (2008) discuss the term “cultural resilience,” which refers to the role that culture may play, as a source of resilience in the individual. The gratitude and awareness expressed by Jordana and “Rebecca” of the importance of honouring Jewish tradition as a response to the Shoah is a manifestation of cultural resilience: the teaching of *tikkun olam* both provides and is evidence of the necessity of continuing the practice of Jewish culture in the post-Shoah world.

Graham et al. (1998) statement, that social workers often engage people in a spiritual search while lacking a “professional language” for this practice, is relevant to the findings of this study. The participants in this study discussed *tikkun olam* as a motivating underlying principle in their work, whether that work is carried out in Jewish or in secular spaces. The language participants possessed was spiritual and personal, drawing on their Jewish education and identity. *Tikkun olam* emerged as being, in secular spaces, an unacknowledged professional practice theory on the part of Jewish workers.

### *Applications to practice*

As outlined in my literature review, *tikkun olam* has shifted meanings over thousands of years of Jewish religious tradition, mysticism and social practice. Consistent with this scope, participants expressed widely



divergent traditions of *tikkun olam*. This study revealed applications of *tikkun olam* to practice. Rabbi Persman's *tikkun olam*, rooted in the teachings of Hasidic Kabbalism, centres the recognition of all things in *olam* as interconnected. In discussing my practicum as an addictions counselor at Vancouver Coastal Health, Rabbi Persman told me that the process of deeply listening to another person is an act of *tikkun*. He told me, "when you are together with your purpose and entirely focused on the other person, there is no concealment." Complete presence as intrinsically therapeutic emerged as a teaching of Kabbalistic *tikkun olam* — manifesting human focus brings the listener into harmony with their purpose.

The application of *tikkun olam* was also described as offering a message of long-term repair. Rabbi Mivasair described *tikkun olam* as an "empowering" concept because it places individual contribution in the context of spiritual work for the collective, adding, "if you don't believe that, it's easy to despair." *Tikkun olam* as a source of meaning on a long-term scale is a lesson to be considered for those working for broader systemic and political change.

Another application for practice that emerges from this research is an understanding of healing as a circular exchange between people, rather than a linear process. Participants were clear that *tikkun olam* is not a philosophy whereby the worker heals the world, but that the individual is always already part of the world, and that inner work and outer work are integrated. There is no distinction drawn between work on self and work with others — they are part of each other and part of the same spiritual process. Participants' philosophies of *tikkun olam* suggest workers enter consciously into an ongoing process of exchange with others. The implications of this in practice are profound. We are co-constituted with others, joined by relationships that are constantly in motion — there is no place where the service "provider" *tikkun* ends and the "receiver" *tikkun* begins.

This relationship can be understood through the message from several participants that belonging and responsibility are co-determined, stated most directly by Jordana as the human desire to make one's community better because "you belong to it." This is the inverse of the philosophy that a community belongs to the individual — rather, it is the collective that takes precedence. Again, this rests on the principle of the circular exchange without beginning or end. In religious terms, this was articulated as the intrinsic belonging of human beings in creation and resulting responsibility; in secular terms this was articulated as the individual's belonging to the community or space.

### *Areas for future research*

The responsibility felt by Canadian Jewish workers to work with Aboriginal people due to the shared experience of cultural genocide is a rich area for future research. Lederman (1999) cites Barry and James' statement that "the beginning of healing may begin now, but the true healing of all our people is going to be seven generations" (p. 82), an Aboriginal prophecy I have been told by a number of Aboriginal colleagues in my work. In-keeping with this statement, the healing from the Shoah could be said to be halfway to completion. The healing from the Indian Residential School system in Canada is much closer to the beginning of the process, the last residential school having closed in 1998.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that *tikkun olam* is a philosophy and practice that is present and alive in diverse community work contexts in Greater Vancouver, in both religious and secular Jewish settings. All participants expressed a deep knowledge of *tikkun olam* and how working towards the "repair of the world" informs their work.

As a social worker with a family history bound into the Shoah, these conversations were part of my *tikkun* and contributed to my reflection on the place of my work, within *olam*, and the lessons I absorbed from my family's experience, as passed down by my grandmother. The principles of interconnectedness, healing as a circular exchange between people, and the spiritual nature of work with people including in contexts of shared experiences of cultural genocide, are lessons I will carry forward with me in my *tikkun*, which, as told in the stories in this study, is best understood as an ongoing and relational process without beginning or end, with the suffering and lessons of the past forever enfolded in the circular relationships of the present.

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