

From The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle – Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Righteous vigor - Social activist calls for change

**By Austin Greenberg**  
*of The Chronicle staff*

Consider this: if you were being held hostage, rabbis and Torah scholars would recommend that, because of the concept of “repair the world,” measures not be taken to facilitate your escape.

Confused? The Hebrew term for “repair the world,” tikkun olam, is overused to the point of becoming cliché, according to activist Margie Klein.

According to 11th century biblical commentator Rashi, tikkun olam dictates that we do not free a captive because doing so will mean that captives in the future will be treated more cruelly.

Rashi’s explanation shows we must make sacrifices in the present in order to create a better future, Klein said to a group of about 30 at a Tikkun Ha-Ir of Milwaukee Lunch ‘n Learn program, held at Lake Park Synagogue on Sunday, March 2.

In the program, titled “An Argument for Systemic Change,” Klein suggested that the concept of tikkun olam may not represent a repairing of the world as much as a recalibration. In light of the world’s inequities, legal remedies are required to restore balance.

“The focus is not so much on the power of an individual to create change, but on the power of law to correct systemic injustice,” she said.

### **Soup kitchen**

In her personal life, Klein, 28, became involved with tikkun olam after volunteering at a soup kitchen. “I got to know the guests and loved them, but after a while I started feeling ... that I wasn’t doing anything that fundamentally changed their possibilities,” Klein said in an interview at the home of Judy Baruch, executive director of Tikkun Ha-Ir.

By working at a soup kitchen, Klein was participating in a form of direct service: *gimmilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness); but she wanted to do more. Upon learning the difference between *gimmilut chasadim* and tikkun olam, which she said is characterized by social action, she became a social activist.

In 2003, Klein founded Project Democracy, a non-partisan group which mobilized 97,000 college students to vote in the 2004 election.

As she traveled to college campuses throughout the country, she repeatedly heard the

message that if you are a religious and moral person, the only issues you should care about are gay marriage and abortion.

“I looked at this as a religious Jew and I said, ‘Well, not only do I have different positions on gay marriage and abortion, but also, these are clearly not the central issues in the Jewish tradition, and as far as I know in the Christian tradition, in terms of our social justice legacy.’”

Candidates should not use religion, she said, but our religion defines who we are, our values and what we believe in. “If we create a disconnect between our religious values that we have at home and our political values that we bring to the ballot, we can wind up forgetting, in our politics, why we’re working on any particular issue,” she explained.

One attendee asked Klein how she can justify using religious perspectives in political discussions when so many people voice their displeasure when the religious right does it. The difference, Klein said, is that she is “not saying, ‘We are right and we know the ultimate truth because it says it in the Bible,’ but to use the language and the inspiration of our texts as one resource to help inspire other people.”

### **Local action**

Convinced that a progressive religious voice was missing in the United States, Klein decided to attempt to fill that void. In 2005, she enrolled in rabbinical school at Hebrew College in Boston, Mass.

Upon beginning rabbinical school, Klein searched for the texts that would guide her on her pursuit of Jewish social activism. When she didn’t find a contemporary source that contained Jewish textual exploration of modern issues, she put one together with the help of Rabbi Or N. Rose and Jo Ellen Green Kaiser.

The result is the new book that they co-edited, “Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice” (Jewish Lights Publishing, hardcover, \$24.99).

The book is part of a larger project on Jewish social justice, also called “Righteous Indignation,” which will hold a national conference in Boston this May to train young activists (ages 22-40) “to facilitate voter engagement and media work around the 2008 election,” she said.

Klein is working with Tikkun Ha-Ir and other Jewish social justice groups across the country to recruit activists to attend the conference.

Travel to and from Boston and conference admission will be free in exchange for activists committing 40 hours of work to get their Jewish communities to participate in the election.

Klein expressed enthusiasm about the Milwaukee organization. “Almost more than any other group in the country, Tikkun Ha-Ir has been able to bring Jews together from across

different denominational backgrounds to fulfill their joint commitment to social justice,” she said.

“I’m very excited [by] the interest of Tikkun Ha-Ir’s leadership in expanding their focus to include advocacy and organizing around long-term social justice and the environment.”

The event concluded with a brainstorming session during which attendees broke into two groups to discuss what Tikkun Ha-Ir is now doing and what it might do to address the problems of hunger/homelessness and water quality/the environment.

“Tikkun Ha-Ir is at a crossroads,” said Baruch. “This will help us frame our decisions about what kinds of future projects we will be involved in.

“We will continue the direct service projects ... but we also want to look deeper and see how we can coordinate with other organizations to be able to ameliorate, if not end, some of these problems.”