

June 10, 2025

Opening Kavanah | SRE Network Symposium

By Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

Last summer, I learned a new way of hearing the old words -- Tikkun Olam -- from a dear friend and colleague in France, Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur. She pointed out that -- in addition to meaning “to repair” or “to fix” -- the Hebrew word *l'taken* can also mean “to braid.” *L'taken se'ar* in contemporary usage is how we say to braid someone's hair.

I've spent a lot of time this year wondering -- what if we started to think of *Tikkun Olam* not as “fixing” but as “braiding” the world together?

Maybe there's something about the metaphor of “fixing” that has gotten us into trouble. Maybe there's something about it that has gotten unhelpfully bound up with American “fix-it-ism.”

The world is not a broken appliance or piece of furniture in need of our fixing. I'm not even sure it's “broken.” But if it is, it is the height of hubris to think we are going to “fix” it.

The image of braiding hair -- and braiding hope -- became even more poignant for me this past January when one of the groups of hostages was brought home from Gaza. You may remember when we learned that -- just before one group of remarkable young women was released -- their friend and fellow captive, Agam Berger, braided their hair, even though she had to stay behind in Gaza. Her mother said, “It was her way of sending them off with love and strength.” Agam was thankfully brought home safely a few days later.

But imagine. Imagine the courage of that act of braiding -- amidst so much violence, uncertainty, and fear. Imagine the tenderness, the dignity, the care.

What if the *tikkun* the world -- and we ourselves -- need is not fixing, but braiding? A return to the awareness -- in the deepest part of our being -- that we are all interconnected.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Each person . . . is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them . . . If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them.”

In the last several months, we have seen how easily we can be buffeted by the latest news, unsteadied by rising violence in both rhetoric and all-too-real actions around us

overwhelmed by the onslaught of orders coming down from the highest halls of power. We may be limited in our ability to control what will be coming down on us, but we have enormous agency about *what we are building up* – how we are caring for ourselves and each other, what kind of capacities we are cultivating, what kind of workplaces and communities we are creating.

In these troubled times, I am profoundly grateful to be here with this group now – especially now –

to gather with people who have made the choice to be patient, painstaking, loving braiders of a better, safer, more respectful, more equitable world.

May we be strengthened by each other as we continue to work together *l'taken olam* – to braid our wounded and war-torn world together.