

Michael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun* magazine, is often at the center of controversy, especially for his position on the complex Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But in his quest for a middle ground, Lerner has emerged as one of the more balanced voices in the debate.

Lerner's latest book, *Healing Israel/Palestine* (Tikkun Books), encourages each side to acknowledge the pain and affirm the fundamental decency of the other. Lerner's attempts to be pro-Israel and pro-Palestine have provoked criticism from both sides — and even death threats.

Now sixty-one, Lerner grew up in Newark, New Jersey, in a household immersed in politics. His parents were leaders in the Zionist movement in the U.S. before World War II. After the war his father became a judge and his mother a political advisor and campaign chair to a U.S. senator. Democratic icons like Adlai Stevenson and Harry Truman passed through the family's home as Lerner was growing up, and when he applied to college, John F. Kennedy wrote him a letter of recommendation.

By the time Lerner was twelve years old, he was reading the *Congressional Record* and noticing the difference between what politicians said and how they actually voted. He saw hypocrisy within Judaism, as well. Says Lerner, "On the one hand, the synagogues of the 1950s were filled with people who articulated high ideals; on the other hand, it was obvious that the real bottom line was materialism and conspicuous consumption."

Then Lerner discovered Abraham Joshua Heschel's book *God in Search of Man*. For years he read a chapter a week, and when he'd finished the book, he started over. As a teenager, Lerner got to meet Heschel, who invited him to come study at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. There, Lerner discovered that some Jews rejected the Americanized Judaism that he knew, suggesting it had little to do with the core of the religion. It was his first encounter with a Jewish critique of Judaism, and it laid the groundwork for his later campaign for a renewal of the core faith.

In 1966 Lerner lived for several months on a kibbutz in Israel. Although the socialist environment of the kibbutz showed him that people could be motivated by nonmaterial rewards,

it also revealed what he saw as the central flaw of socialism: the absence of a spiritual element.

By the late sixties, Lerner had become a leader in the antiwar movement in the U.S. He was a member of the Seattle Seven, a group of activists indicted by the federal government for using the facilities of interstate commerce (the telephone) with the intent to incite to riot — i.e., a protest against the Vietnam War. FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover called Lerner "one of America's most dangerous criminals." Lerner was jailed at Terminal Island Federal Penitentiary for contempt of court. The conspiracy charges were later dropped and the laws under which they had been brought declared unconstitutional.

When the antiwar movement lost steam, Lerner attributed some of the responsibility to what he called the "surplus powerlessness" of the activists themselves. They couldn't recognize their own successes, he says, because "they continually redefined the criteria for success in a way that made them feel like failures." A desire to understand this self-destructive "pathology" led Lerner to study psychotherapy. He also wanted to examine his own emotional life. Says Lerner, "I found myself being too judgmental, particularly in regard to my parents." He finished his second PhD (his first was in philosophy) at the Wright Institute in 1977 and went to work as a clinical psychologist.

In the late seventies and early eighties Lerner became increasingly distressed at a political shift in the Jewish community from liberalism to conservatism. This eventually led him to found *Tikkun* magazine in 1986. His goal was to revitalize the liberal and progressive voices of American Jews. But Lerner's activism isn't limited to the Middle

East and Jewish American circles. Today *Tikkun* (the name means "to heal or transform" in Hebrew) helps liberals of all faiths integrate the spiritual and the political in their lives. Lerner recently formed the *Tikkun* Community, an interfaith group — it even welcomes agnostics and atheists — committed to nonviolence, global consciousness, and ecological sanity.

As a rabbi, Lerner leads services in several locations in San Francisco. His congregation, *Beyt Tikkun*, is an outgrowth of the Jewish Renewal movement, which combines spirituality with a call for social change. Lerner's book *Jewish Renewal: A*

RESURRECTING THE REVOLUTIONARY HEART OF JUDAISM

*an interview with
Michael Lerner*



ARNIE COOPER

Path to Healing and Transformation (*Perennial*) outlines his plan to reclaim Judaism's revolutionary spirit. He expands the discussion to all faiths in *Spirit Matters* (Walsch Books / Hampton Roads).

Lerner is currently mobilizing people from every U.S. Congressional district for the Tikkun Community's second annual Teach-In to Congress for Middle East Peace, April 25 through 27 in Washington, D.C. Their goal is to convince Congress that many Americans do not support the Occupation or the building of a wall inside the West Bank — "not because we oppose Israel, but because we see its current policies as self-destructive and a violation of the highest values of the Jewish people. We believe it is in America's interests, and Israel's, and the Jewish people's, to seek peace and reconciliation, and we invite others to join us in D.C." (To learn more, visit www.tikkun.org.)

Lerner has lived in the Berkeley hills since 1986. He has a thirty-one-year-old son, Akiva, and recently became a grandfather. We spoke in his living room, which is packed with books on many topics, including transpersonal psychology, philosophy, and politics. In person Lerner is passionate, down-to-earth, and tireless. A portrait of him as a young boy hangs on the wall. Though decades have passed since it was painted, he still projects the same sense of youthful optimism.

Lerner welcomes correspondence and can be reached by e-mail at RabbiLerner@tikkun.org.

Cooper: Let's begin with the legitimacy of Israel. You talk of not blaming either side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Doesn't this cover up the fact that one people came to another people's land and dislocated them?

Lerner: There is no land on this planet that hasn't been taken through force from someone who lived there before. In my view, nobody has any legitimate claim to a particular land. The Jews returned to their ancient homeland and came into conflict with a largely Muslim group of people whose ancestors had taken it from the people who had lived there before, who were descendants of a group who had conquered it under the Romans. Before the Romans came the Greeks. Before them there were the Persians, and before them the Babylonians, and before them the Jews, and before the Jews there were others whom we Jews dispossessed. This is true of every place on the planet, and especially here in the United States.

So instead of focusing on whose ancestors give one a right to own a particular land, we need a new discourse that focuses on our common responsibility. The Torah puts it this way: "God says, 'The whole world is mine.'" The point is that there is no absolute right to private property or ownership of a particular land by a particular people. I believe our responsibility is to share this globe and its resources equally with every person on the planet in a way that is ecologically sustainable.

Let me make an analogy here. Let's say I live on land that my ancestors built up and made into what it is today. Suddenly another group arrives wanting to live here, as the Jewish people did in Palestine. And the way these newcomers live is very different from the way I live. Do I have a right to keep them out? The Irish of Boston thought they did. They said that blacks



TIMOTHY BYARS

who were coming up from the South in the 1970s had no right to live there or go to their schools. "We built this town from scratch," the Irish said. "They're going to destroy our culture. They're going to bring different values and lifestyles. And they are going to take over our cities."

To the fact that Southern blacks were an oppressed people in need of a place to live, the Irish responded, "We didn't oppress them. We even sent troops to the Civil War to end their oppression. Why should we continue to solve their problems?" Eventually the federal government stepped in and told the Irish that blacks would be allowed to live there and go to integrated schools.

This is very similar to the situation that faced the Jews before World War II. Some of them wanted to go back to their ancient homeland, but the Palestinians said, "We have no place for you here. This is our society. We built it, and you're going to destroy everything." The Palestinians had no similar rule against Arabs coming in. In fact, they welcomed Arabs. They just didn't want Jews. It wasn't about there being too many people in the area; it was about who the people were. And this was precisely what Jews have faced for two thousand years, since Roman imperialism threw us out of our land — everywhere we went we were seen as a threat because we brought our own values and our own culture and language. And though we were refugees, we were always perceived as somehow having the magical power to overwhelm everyone unless we were dominated first.

Do countries have the right to exclude people based on ethnicity or religion or national background? I say no. I would not support the U.S. having an ethnic criterion — as it did for

a long time — for who can come here. I think we have a right to set a limit on the number of immigrants, so that we don't have an ecological disaster. But admission should not be based on ethnicity. The Palestinians' refusal to admit Jewish refugees was fundamentally racist and illegitimate.

Some early Zionists were socialist internationalists who envisioned a Jewish society that might exist in harmony with Palestinians. But the hostile reception from Palestinians weakened the influence of those internationalists and strengthened the hand of the most right-wing Jews, who said, "We shouldn't be surprised that the Palestinians are hostile — they are just like all the other non-Jews in the world. That's precisely why we need a state of our own and an army of our own, and why we can't build a society based on cooperation with Arabs, who don't want us here any more than people anywhere else on the planet want us there. Everyone is against us, so here, in our ancient homeland, we will take our stand and create a safe place for Jews." The influence of this more nationalist thinking increased during the Second World War. Jews were being murdered by the millions in Europe, but the Arabs used their influence to convince the British not to allow any Jewish refugees into Palestine.

After World War II, the UN declared that Jews had the right to build a state for themselves in Palestine and urged the creation of two states, but Palestinians rejected that plan and insisted that they wanted only one state (in which they would have been the majority). War broke out between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Soon the surrounding Arab states also declared war on the new Jewish state. Some Arabs living in the area were forcefully uprooted from their homes by acts of Jewish terror or by forced evacuations. But a greater number fled out of a reasonable fear that they might become victims of this war. Most Jews saw themselves as fighting a last fight of survival. Unlike the Palestinians, who could flee to neighboring lands, the Jews had no place to go for safety — this was it. They had just seen their own people massacred during World War II. It's no wonder that many agreed with the right-wing, ultranationalist Jews' claim that Jewish safety and security could come only from expelling Palestinians. They felt justified in doing this because of the way the Palestinians had behaved toward Jewish refugees.

After the war, Israel refused to let these refugees come back to their homes. Since not all Arabs had fled — hundreds of thousands had stayed — the Israeli government said that those who did flee had identified with the enemy and were not allowed to come back. Now, I think that Israeli policy was a terrible, tragic error, and morally unacceptable in the same way that it was morally unacceptable for Palestinians not to have allowed Jews to immigrate in the first place. But to sum up the whole conflict by saying, "Jews came and expelled the Palestinians," as some on the Left like to say, demonizes the Jews and obscures the complex reality in which both sides co-created this mess.

Jews jumped from the burning buildings of Europe and landed, unintentionally, on the backs of the Palestinians. Because our pain was so great from the Holocaust, we didn't notice

the pain we caused them. Nor could we understand how they could see us as aggressors or colonialists when we had been the primary victim of the European colonial powers for two thousand years, and had also been the victim of apartheid-like conditions in most Arab states (which still treated us better than we were treated by Christians). The Palestinians were furious at us for coming there, perceived us to be a threat, made no attempt to reach out and build bonds of understanding, saw us as modern Crusaders (though the Crusades had also targeted Jews), and acted in violent ways that validated the most paranoid Jewish perceptions of Arabs. Ultranationalist Jews then acted in violent ways that confirmed the Arabs' most paranoid perceptions of Jews.

Cooper: Which brings us to where we are today.

Lerner: Yes, we are now looking at two peoples who have come to a moment of despair and mutual hurt and cruelty. I do not claim that these sides are equal in power. Israel is the occupying army. In 2002, Amnesty International issued a report on war crimes committed by Israeli troops in Jenin and Nablus, including unlawfully killing Palestinians, blocking medical care, using people as human shields, and bulldozing houses with residents inside. Yet Amnesty also made it clear that some Palestinian militants have engaged in attacks on Israeli civilians that can only be described as crimes against humanity. The deliberate targeting of innocent civilians is unacceptable in any civilized society.

Cooper: How do you explain suicide attacks?

Lerner: An occupation turns ordinary civilians into terrorists. If you control a population against their will, violate their basic human rights, use them as hostages and human shields, torture their young men, and impose twenty-four-hour curfews under threat of death, then you will find yourself fighting ordinary civilians, because that's whom you are oppressing.

But the blame game makes no sense. Both sides have a story to tell. The Occupation did not start this struggle, but it has made it far worse. To end it will require a breakthrough in consciousness on both sides. Such a possibility seems more and more remote as the hurt increases.

Cooper: What has been the media's role in perpetuating stereotypes on both sides?

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Acting from love and kindness is a privilege. . . . Those of us who insist that the solution lies in cooperation and generosity are not on a higher moral plane. We are just less oppressed.

Arabs were evil.

Lerner: In many Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, it's the same as it's always been, or worse. While there are some notable exceptions, most identify exclusively with the very real pain faced by Israelis and close their eyes to the suffering of the "other." In the Reform and Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal movements, there is more focus on social justice, but many of their young people tell me that when they try to bring up the issue of social justice for the Palestinians, they are ignored. That's why we at *Tikkun*, and those in the progressive sections of all Jewish movements, are building a global Judaism that can address the need for healing and transcend Jewish chauvinism and the conceit that our pain is more important than everyone else's pain. This emerging global Judaism must reject or transform every part of our tradition that leads Jews to be insensitive to the pains of the other or insensitive to the vast ecological crisis facing all humanity. What the planet needs is for us to overcome separation and recognize the fundamental unity of all human beings. And that means really caring about the other, not just mouthing pious words

choose between their Jewishness and their moral center, and they end up distancing themselves from the Jewish world — because many Jewish institutions are dominated by conservative and morally insensitive people who make everyone who questions Israeli policy feel that they are "self-hating Jews." Few Jews even know that there are hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who desperately want an accommodation with Israel so that they can live in peace. When I go to speak at synagogues or churches, people often ask, "Why is it only Jews who want to reach out to the other side?" The answer, of course, is that the mainstream media never quote Palestinians who want peace. But you can read about them in *Tikkun* or at www.tikkun.org.

Cooper: What's being taught now in the synagogues and Hebrew schools? When I was growing up, I was taught that the Jews were good and the

while actually living a life in which we hoard the goodies of the planet for ourselves. (Here I'm thinking of the U.S. in general, not Jews in particular.) We need to repair the damage of 150 years of both capitalist and communist industrialization. Any religious system that prevents us from doing this should be transformed.

Cooper: How does anti-Semitism shape Jewish thought and attitudes?

Lerner: By the time the Jews came along, the world was already class-stratified. A few people had great power, and most had very little. The wealthy and powerful elite traditionally maintain power through force and by convincing people that nothing can be done to change things. They also convince people that some "other" — a neighboring group or minority — is causing all the problems.

The Jews arrived on the scene with an ideology and a Torah that said the world can be fundamentally changed. We knew that anyone who said that hierarchical oppression is built into the structure of the universe was lying, because we'd been slaves and now we were free. It was a revolutionary message that generated a tremendous amount of resentment among the ruling class. They didn't want people to hear this message. So the ruling elite of the ancient world demeaned the Jews and tried to convince people to hate us. That was the beginning of anti-Semitic attitudes in the ancient, pre-Christian world.

Most Jews didn't want to be in conflict with the powerful, so they turned away from the revolutionary aspects of their own tradition and tried to convince the powerful there was no need to worry, that Judaism was not really a way of life, which is how the Torah described it, but "only a religion," narrowly confined to the spiritual side of one's life. Particularly after the Jews were conquered and oppressed by the Greeks and the Romans, the revolutionary message of hope and transformation seemed less and less real, and those who sought to play down that message and play up the message of accommodation had greater influence. Gradually, Judaism became less of a revolutionary practice. Still, its Exodus story, told every week in the Torah readings and each year on the major Jewish holidays, retained the revolutionary consciousness, and Jews kept a culture of rebelliousness and lack of respect for secular power and authority that confounded the Romans until they expelled most Jews from their homeland, which the Romans renamed Palestine.

Once the Christian Church became the dominant power, it had yet another reason to oppress us: we said Jesus was not the Son of God, and he certainly wasn't the Messiah, because our texts had defined the Messiah as the person who would bring a period in which the lion lies down with the lamb and nations beat their swords into plowshares. Jesus didn't bring an era of peace to the planet, so from the Jewish perspective, it was obvious that the Messiah had not yet come. That made the Christians' anger toward the Jews even more intense.

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