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Reflections on Israel's 60th

By Rabbi Michael Lerner
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Editor's Note: Seldom has the Shakespearian observation that "the evil that men do lives after them" been more true than with Adolf Hitler and his Nazis, whose genocide against the Jews created fear, resentment and behavioral changes that have reverberated to the present day.

In this guest essay, Rabbi Michael Lerner reflects on how the Holocaust and the failure of the United States and other countries to give refuge to imperiled Jews shaped the Zionist movement that founded Israel six decades ago this week:

When I was a child, Zionism was the national liberation struggle of the Jewish people.

While the United States and all other countries -- including the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist countries -- closed their doors to Jews seeking refuge from the murder of millions of Jews by the fascists, and while the Palestinian people's leadership used their influence with the British to ensure that Jews would not be able to settle in our ancient homeland both during and immediately after the Second World War as hundreds of thousands of survivors languished in displaced persons' camps in Europe, the Zionist movement championed the need for a state of the Jewish people with its own army and its own territory.

For a people who had been stateless for 20 centuries, who were forced to depend on the often-absent "good will" of their hosts in Europe, Africa, and Asia, the prospect of a homeland, prayed for everyday by Jews around the world for 2,000 years, seemed to be at once impossible and yet the only imaginable redemption from the trauma of the Holocaust and the previous centuries of suffering and insecurity.

Jews jumped from the burning buildings of Europe into Palestine not because we were servants of imperial or colonial interests, but because we were desperate and because no one wanted us or would protect us.

Unfortunately and tragically, we landed on the backs of Palestinians who were already there, and we hurt many of them in our landing.

So scarred were we by our own pain -- having just witnessed the death of one out of every three Jews alive on the planet -- that we were unable to notice or take seriously the pain that we were causing to the Palestinian people in the process.

When our army uprooted Palestinians from their homes and villages, it was in the midst of a struggle for survival in which Jews were determined to be as ruthless towards others as others had been towards us.

Yet, there were alternatives.

We could have remained a minority in an Arab country and hoped for the goodness of the Arab people to prevail, particularly if Jews had been able to align with Arabs in the anti-colonial struggle against the British and French.

The Zionist movement could have made dramatic overtures to the feudal landlords who owned much of the land in Palestine and who feared that our ideas of socialism would lead to a revolution against their interests, though that would have furthered alienated us from the Arab masses.

We could have reached out, as Martin Buber and Judah Magnes did, to a growing Palestinian nationalist movement and tried to create a bi-national state, though at the time the hostilities and acts of terror from Palestinian extremists toward the Jewish minority, and by Zionist extremists toward Palestinian civilians, made this option appear unlikely to a Jewish population that had unwisely trusted the people of Europe to act with some level of human decency, and then were betrayed and murdered.

We could have rejected the Histadrut's "Jewish only" policy of membership in its powerful union and its health care system, and those efforts might actually have paved the way toward a less violent reception by the Palestinian majority.

We could have put our energies into demanding that the United States open its gates and let Jews settle here, perhaps resettling Jews in Hawaii and California, though in so doing they would have had to contend against the post-WWII conviction of many Jews that only a state of our own with an army of our own could ever be trusted to provide us with security in light of the failure of the U.S. and other Western countries to save us from fascism and its genocide.

Not to mention the growing conviction of many Jews that with a state of our own we could create for the first time in 2,000 years a vigorous Jewish culture, a political polity that reflected our values, and a society in which Jews would not have our lives subordinated to the will of a non-Jewish majority.

In retrospect there is much to be said for the Buber/Magnes position of giving far more attention to attempting to build ties of reconciliation and mutual respect with Palestinians before establishing a Jewish state.

'Realists' Shape Reality

But the Zionist movement was made up of "realists" who didn't believe in the possibility of reconciliation, the Palestinian people were led by similar "realists" who didn't believe that it would be possible to live in peace with Jews, and hence refused to allow Jewish immigrants (although immigrants of any other religion were welcome), and the British did everything in their power to set both communities against each other (as it did wherever it held colonial power, encouraging ethnic clashes so as to undermine anti-colonial unity).

Both sides had embraced nationalist rhetoric, and both sides had left behind the loving messages of their respective religions. Both sides were traumatized by their own history, and by outrageous acts of violence perpetrated by the other.

I've detailed this history in my book *Healing Israel/Palestine* (North Atlantic Books, 2003). And I'm well aware that partisans on each side have plenty of "facts" to use to "prove" that it was really the other side that caused all the problems, and that there is no "moral equivalency" between, for example, the slaying of Jews in Hebron in 1929 and the slaying of Arabs in Deir Yassin in 1948.

The list of atrocities is long on both sides, and only those who wish to "win" for their side continue to insist that it was they who were innocent and the others were "evil" in intent as well as in action.

The expulsion of Palestinians from their homes – some by fear of being subject to terrorist attacks consciously planned to evoke that fear by Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, and the Zionist terrorist groups that they led, some (at least a hundred thousand) by acts of the Israeli army (now fully documented by Israeli historians), and still others by fear of being caught in a war zone (but then, Jews had no place to avoid the war zone, no neighboring countries to which to flee, no more in 1948 than we had when we were being slaughtered by the millions from 1939-1945, and for us, that was decisive about why we felt we had a right to stay), intensified angers.

But these relationships could have been repaired had Israel allowed the refugees to return home after the armistice was reached in 1949. It did not.

Instead Israel declared those who had left, whether by force or by fear, as a "hostile population," and shot as "terrorists" those who sought to sneak over the border in ensuing years to return to their homes.

Those actions, particularly the brutal murders by Ariel Sharon and his Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) unit in the early 1950s, provoked counter-acts of terror by Palestinians. The story has only intensified in killings of civilians ever since.

Surrounding Arab states have not helped the matter. Their decision by some Arab leaders (not that of ordinary Palestinians living in their homeland without democratic mechanisms to choose the people who spoke for them) led to the 1947-1949 War and to disaster for Palestinians.

For at least five decades thereafter, those Arab states, with the exception of Jordan and Egypt, rejected every attempt by Israel to make peace. Except for Jordan, all of those states have been wildly insensitive to the needs of their Arab brothers and sisters, and have used their cause as a political football to embarrass Israel, whose existence they hoped to overcome.

It's only in the last decade that most of these states have come to accept that there is no military solution likely to yield a better deal for the Arabs than what they could get through negotiations.

Moreover, many of those Arab states have treated Palestinian refugees at least as poorly, and sometimes considerably worse (e.g. Lebanon) than have the Israelis.

Yet, as the example of Egypt and Jordan shows, those states no longer act as a bloc, and even the most extreme among them have finally come to accept the reality of Israel and have given up most of their fantasies that Israel would some day disappear.

Only the non-Arab state of Iran still has leadership holding on to that illusion.

National PTSD

When I look back and watch the irrational and self-defeating behavior of both sides, and when I interview people on both sides of this struggle, one concept shouts out to me: PTSD-Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The trauma on both sides has led people to be unable to think rationally about what is in their own best interests.

For the Palestinians that trauma led them to reject the proposal of a two-state solution that was offered them in 1947, and for them to encourage the surrounding Arab states to reject every offer made by Israel in subsequent decades even after those states were decisively defeated in the 1967 War.

In later decades, starting in the 1980s, it was the Jews who rejected reasonable offers for peace, and instead imagined that their military might would allow them to crush the Palestinian national movement. Illusion after illusion after illusion.

Even today, Israel has been faced with an offer by the Arab states for full recognition and peace if Israel would simply return to the pre-1967 borders.

However, Israel will not accept, though it knows full well that in the negotiations the Palestinians would allow the Jews to hold on to the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and would even consider trading some close-to-the-border land to allow some of the major Israeli settlements if Israel gave an equal amount of land back to the Palestinians and made a credible and serious offer to provide reparations for Palestinian refugees.

If Israel were to approach this kind of offer in a spirit of open-heartedness, it could soon work out details that would provide Israel with adequate security.

Arrogance of power? Subordination to the religious messianism of the West Bank settlers? Sure, those play a role.

But in my view, it is PTSD that is decisive in keeping Israelis from looking at their actual situation: a tiny minority in a world surrounded by Arab and Muslim states whose power will only grow in the coming decades and whose anger at Israel grows in intensity as they watch the state that claims to be the representative of the Jewish people act in horrendous and cruel ways toward Palestinians.

Any rational assessment would lead Israelis to accept the terms being offered to them, and to do so in a way that manifested a spirit of generosity and caring for those whom it had hurt, tortured, falsely imprisoned, killed, or wounded.

Similarly, it is PTSD that can best explain how Palestinians would embrace Hamas or Hezbollah and fantasize that they can eventually destroy Israel rather than work out an agreement that allows Israel to exist as a Jewish state (that is, as a state that gives affirmative action in regard to immigration to Jews who have a reasonable claim to fear of persecution where they are currently living – but not a state that is run by Jewish religious law except in the cultural sense that Jewish holidays are given the same official public priority in that state that Christmas is given in the United States).

How do you deal with two peoples who are suffering from PTSD? Well, we know what you don't do. You don't try to coerce them into situations in which they perceive themselves as vulnerable to re-experiencing the insecurity and pain that caused the trauma in the first place.

This is why I've argued against any attempt to force Israel through coercion into accepting solutions that make it feel more vulnerable.

It's not that using coercion would be wrong or immoral, but that it will have the exact opposite effect than intended.

Disinvestment in Israel, for example, would only reconfirm the basic feeling (based on a great deal of historical reality) that "the whole world is against us, but that this time we will not be led like sheep to the slaughter in the way that European Jewry allowed itself to be destroyed" (a false description of European Jewry, but nevertheless the dominant perception in Israel).

The Massada Complex remains a central frame through which Israelis experience their reality: the courageous Jews who preferred death to surrendering to the Roman imperialists who were seeking to outlaw Jewish life in what the Romans had named "Palestine."

In this case, the Israelis are armed with hundreds of nuclear weapons. There is enough willingness on the part of the majority to use those weapons even if in the process they destroyed themselves.

Thus, the situation cannot be analogized to that which existed in the 1980s and early 1990s in South Africa. On the one hand, the entire world recognized that apartheid was fundamentally evil. There is no such consensus about Israel or its policies.

Apartheid meant that there was a legal structure preventing blacks from voting, participating in the same schools or same beaches as whites. There is no such set of laws within the pre-1967 boundaries of the State of Israel.

There is certainly deprivation of rights in the West Bank and Gaza, but those deprivations stem from a political assessment of the alleged dangers that Israel faces, not from a commitment to degrade all Palestinians (though this distinction is rapidly losing its force as the settlers become more active in periodic pogroms against Palestinian civilians).

On the other hand, the minority of whites in South Africa were not part of a people who had always suffered systematic persecution, and though they had some reason to fear what might happen to them as a minority in a black country, they did not have reasonable claim on the conscience of the rest of the world for the world's ignoring them while they were being systematically slaughtered.

Yes, it's true that in the West Bank the conditions of oppression and discrimination are in many respects worse than those which existed in South Africa – but it is not apartheid, and using that word or thinking that one can use the same strategies to challenge Israeli policy has proved to be a dead-end.

General Boycott Opposed

So while I support boycotts and disinvestment in Western firms that make goods specifically to help the settlers and the IDF be more effective in enforcing the Occupation, I oppose any general boycott of Israel itself.

And there are moral reasons to oppose it as well – after all, the amount of suffering that Israel imposes on the Palestinian people pales in comparison to what the United States continues to do to Iraq.

Any boycott that doesn't also involve active campaigns for boycotting and disinvestment in U.S. firms feels like selective prosecution, and something inappropriate for majority Christian or majority Muslim societies that have not yet taken full responsibility for their own role in creating the trauma that is now being played out against Palestinians.

In fact, this last point should remind us of the larger context. Israel has been put into the same position internationally that Jews often were forced into domestically in Eastern Europe: the public face of a system of oppression that Jews did not control but which they served in part because they received protection from ruling elites.

History has shown that this position is precarious, and a bad deal for Jews. But it is Western imperialism and colonialism that set this up, and Jews are only one of many peoples who suffer the consequences along with our Palestinian brothers and sisters.

Yet this reality should also remind Jews that placing their faith in the allegiance of the U.S. capitalist class is a terrible strategic error almost certain to backfire.

The anger generated by American imperialism around the world, often with the backing of Israel as its sole loyal ally in disgraceful acts of domination, is generating huge amounts of anger that will be passed down from generation to generation among the peoples of the world.

It's a story we could have learned from the Book of Genesis in the Torah – Joseph becomes the prime minister of Egypt, comes up with economic schemes that deprive many Egyptians of their livelihood, and in future generations the Egyptians then enslave and oppress the Jews.

This is not a rational strategy for long-term survival.

The problem with PTSD is that it deprives people of the capacity to think about long-term survival and instead focuses them on the perceived (and usually unrealistic) immediate threats to such an extent that they are unable to act rationally.

What can one do with such a reality?

The techniques of psychotherapy have proved of only limited impact with PTSD clients, but they have some chance. Not so when trying to build a mass psychology of healing for a whole society, particularly when the society has not elected to undergo therapy!

Those of us who know healing is necessary are far from being empowered to develop societal strategies that could begin the healing process. For us, part of the problem is to get the society to recognize that it could benefit from therapy.

My own work with the Institute for Labor and Mental Health started on this same challenge with regard to destigmatizing the use of therapy for working-class people.

We developed a campaign to popularize the notion that everyone is facing stress, that one is not "crazy" if one seeks support for stress-related problems, and that talking to someone about it would be helpful and not a sign of self-identifying as mentally ill.

It was a powerful strategy, and by the mid-1980s we had become so successful that the term "stress" entered the popular vocabulary with much broader meanings than it had ever had before.

One of the goals of the Tikkun Community and the Network of Spiritual Progressives is to bring together psychotherapists in the West with Israeli and Palestinian therapists to explore what would be analogous work in those societies.

A central ingredient in any serious strategy will be the task of reassuring people in both societies that they are not hated and demeaned by the peoples of the world, but rather than they are understood in some deep way.

That's why in *Healing Israel/Palestine* I try to tell the history in a way that shows that both sides have a legitimate story, both sides have been unnecessarily cruel to the other, both sides need to do repentance and atonement.

Sure, the story can be told in a blame-oriented way. But that will only make it less likely that we can heal the two sides enough that they could actually imagine feeling safe enough to make compromises for a real peace.

Those who want to advance social healing should begin writing the texts, composing the songs, and creating the TV and movie documentaries, that have as their goal the presentation of this kind of balanced and non-blaming compassionate perspective.

I don't underestimate the difficulties in this strategy. The very fact of telling the story in a balanced way in the Jewish community in the United States has earned Tikkun the reputation of being anti-Semitic, or run by self-hating Jews.

The organized Jewish community in the United States, prodded on by the Israel Lobby (see my discussion in Tikkun Sept/Oct 2007) has been one of the major impediments to this kind of discourse, or to any peace process that cares equally for both sides.

Obama and Clinton

Barack Obama felt that pressure intensely enough to insert in his now-famous speech on race in Philadelphia a line about the real problem in the Middle East stemming not even in part from the clashes and tensions between Israel and its neighbors and the frustrations of hundreds of millions of Muslims watching as their Muslim brothers and sisters are subjected to systematic violations of their human rights, but only from Islamic fundamentalism.

Not to be outdone, Hillary Clinton warned that were it to attack Israel she as president would "obliterate" Iran.

These are only the latest examples of the incredible power of the Israel Lobby to make clear that loyalty to Israel's policies is necessary for any American politician to avoid political suicide in the U.S. – one can question U.S. policy (e.g. in regard to the current war we are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and possibly in Iran), but we dare not question Israeli policy!

So what can we who love Israel, want to see it survive and flourish, and feel that its current path is self-destructive, actually do politically?

At least for the short run, we've found that lobbying Congress is a dead-end, because most of the congressional leaders who agree with our "progressive Middle Path that is both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine" feel scared to say so publicly, and will continue to feel this way until some mainstream political candidate is willing to run for president and make this Middle Path his or her own.

Similarly, and for reasons explained above, there's no point in demonstrations that one-sidedly fault Israel, even though Israel, at the moment, has far superior power and hence far superior responsibility to take the first steps to change the situation.

Of course, we'll work with the "J Street" project to help create an alternative to AIPAC, but the pressures on that "alternative" to moderate its message in ways that make it less effective will be huge, and the tendency to focus only on policy issues and not on the underlying mass psychology that has contributed to AIPAC's power is going to be immense.

What does make sense is to challenge the mass psychology through a politics of compassion and a discourse of non-violence.

Those of us who wish to see Palestinians freed from subjugation, and Israel living in peace with its neighbors, have to begin to apply the wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi to the situation in the Middle East.

Efforts to create dialogue, to learn how to express oneself in ways that are supportive and not hostile, to learn how to respond to violence with non-violence, must be coupled with a principled embrace of non-violence and teaching non-violence in our public schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and religious schools.

But there is a deeper change that is needed to heal Israel/Palestine: a change in our own U.S. conception of what brings security.

The Network of Spiritual Progressives/Tikkun Community evolved from its primary focus on challenging Israeli policy to challenging the Domination Strategy (the view that homeland security comes from imposing our will on others lest they impose their will on us) in Western societies.

This evolution occurred not only because of the moral disaster of the Iraq War, but also because we became increasingly convinced that at the heart of the Middle East struggle was the need to undermine the Domination Strategy that has become the common sense, not only of the post 9/11 Western countries but also of the mass consciousness in Israel and Palestine.

In place of that slippery slope to violence and war, we propose a Strategy of Generosity: that homeland security can best be achieved through acts of genuine caring and generosity toward others, so that we are perceived as (and actually become) a country that recognizes our fundamental interconnection with all other human beings on the planet and with the well-being of the planet itself.

It is that thinking which now leads us to give a priority attention to the Global Marshall Plan, not only because it is the best way to end global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education and inadequate healthcare, but also because it is the best way to lead by example and to show both Arab and Israeli peoples the way that could bring them lasting peace.

This, we believe, is the most important contribution we in the West could make to healing Israel/Palestine.

More Generosity

If we could build a political movement in Western societies that was committed to the Strategy of Generosity and the Global Marshall Plan, we would help Israelis feel that acting from generosity was not some utopian fantasy but rather a way of thinking that was already legitimated in the politics of the more advanced industrial societies of the West.

In this way we could re-empower the many decent people in Israel/Palestine who today avoid politics, certain that there is no point, and that no one would ever be willing to make the compromises necessary for peace.

Living in the West, we have an important role, but it is not that of imposing our solution, but rather that of modeling a way of relating to others that could infectiously transform the world's "common sense."

Just as the women's movement, first dismissed as "unrealistic," has had a profound impact on every country on the planet, so a movement for love and generosity, and for a New Bottom Line, such as that detailed in our Global Marshall Plan (to read go to www.tikkun.org and click on "Current Thinking") and our Spiritual Covenant with America (to read go to www.spiritualprogressives.org) could have a profound impact on the process of healing the Middle East.

To the extent that we can make that happen here, we would be making a huge contribution toward the possibility of lasting peace for Israel.

In future writing I will discuss the meaning of the situation in Israel/Palestine for those who believe in God and who want to keep Judaism alive.

For now, suffice it to say that the kind of Zionism that has emerged in Israel is fundamentally incompatible with the highest values of the Jewish tradition, and must be rejected even as we develop a compassionate attitude toward the Jewish people of Israel.

For those who wish to see Judaism survive the twenty-first century, a major first step is to separate the religion from its current identity with the policies of a national state that has lots of Jews living in it and that has succeeded in getting many Jews around the world identifying it as "The Jewish State."

I personally feel tremendous pride in many aspects of what the Jews in Israel have accomplished on the fronts of culture, science, and technology, even as I feel tremendous shame at what they have failed to accomplish in human relations, ethics, and environmental sensitivity.

But I carefully separate my sense of family – which for me is tied quite strongly to the State of Israel – from my understanding of what is required of us to serve God and to preserve Judaism in the contemporary period.

For that latter goal, we must be willing to apply the prophetic tradition and ask Israelis Isaiah's powerful question: "Who asked you to trample in My Courtyard" and to defile the holiness of God's Torah?

Judaism teaches us to "love the stranger," (the Other). There is no more frequently quoted injunction in Torah than variations on the following theme: "When you come into your land, do not oppress the stranger: remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

A Jewish state that has been unwilling or unable to live by that command has no religious foundation and can generate no lasting support from those committed to God and Torah.

Such a state, failing that central commandment, is unlikely to provide safety and security for the Jewish people in any long-term way in the twenty-first century.

Like every other people on the planet, Jews have a yearning to live in a world based on love and kindness and generosity. We will respond to those possibilities just as all peoples will if given half a chance.

The task of building a Network of Spiritual Progressives is to convince all peoples that far from being a naïve utopian fantasy, building such a world of open-heartedness, compassion, and caring for others is the immediate survival task of the twenty-first century.

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