

World Goodwill interview of Rabbi Michael Lerner, Editor of Tikkun magazine (June 17, 2003)

Today we are fortunate to be able to speak with Rabbi Michael Lerner who studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He also received a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the Wright Institute. In 1986 he launched *Tikkun* magazine, and is the author of numerous books, including *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*, *Jews and Blacks* with Cornel West, *The Politics of Meaning*, *Spirit Matters*, and most recently, *Healing Israel/Palestine*. Rabbi Lerner has been actively engaged in attempting to create a thoughtform of solution to the problems in the Middle East. Welcome Rabbi Lerner.

WG: You are the editor of *Tikkun* magazine. Would you please explain what the word “tikkun” means, and how this concept underlies the work that you do?

ML: “Tikkun” is a Hebrew word, and it means to heal, repair and transform the world. And the work that we’re doing is trying to build a social change movement that aims at the transformation of the world from an ethos of materialism and selfishness to an ethos of love and caring, generosity and kindness.

WG: That sounds like a very noble work that you’re doing. As I mentioned, your work is wide-ranging. In the beginning of this interview, however, we would like to focus upon the work you are currently doing to educate and enlighten public opinion as to the causes underlying the crisis situation in the Middle East. Could you explain how it is that you came to be involved in this work?

ML: Well, I grew up in a Jewish world and am passionately involved with Israel. I care a lot about Israel and its survival in the world, and so that’s one dimension. And I became increasingly convinced that Israel’s well-being and survival depended on a transformation of its understanding of its situation, so that instead of imagining that it could achieve security through domination and control over Palestinians or surrounding Arab states, that it needed to recognise that the only way that it would have a viable future is through cooperation and friendship with the Palestinian people and the surrounding Arab states. So that was one dimension.

The second dimension is that as somebody who is in general talking about the possibility of a world based on kindness and generosity and love, I continually face the skepticism of people about these values. One source of that skepticism was that the very religious institutions that had first talked over these ideals originated in the Middle East, that the peoples who were articulating those ideals in the Middle East were actually, in fact, at each other’s throats, beating each other up, and so how could you possibly think that a world based on kindness and generosity is possible when you see that those who originated those ideals are actually engaged in the opposite of kindness and generosity. So that gave me a further impetus to want to address the Middle East mess.

WG: Through your magazine and your recent book *Healing Israel/Palestine*, you have taken a courageous position on the situation in the Middle East, one that emphasizes the common humanity and the legitimate claims of both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Would you please tell us something about your book, and what you hope to accomplish through writing it?

ML: Yes, well the book *Healing Israel/Palestine* is an attempt to tell the story, starting from the 19th century and up through 2003, of how two sides, two peoples, both of whom are

fundamentally decent, both of whom have the normal range of people, ranging from saints to hideously hurtful people, like every other people in the world, could end up locked in this kind of combat, in which each saw the other as the embodiment of evil and saw itself as righteous victims. And so, what I try to do is to tell how this could have happened, and how actually each step along the way really makes sense if you understand the history of each people and the framework through which it perceived the other. And so, the book is an attempt to provide a balanced account of the history that recognises that both sides have legitimate claims to the land, and that both sides acted in ways that were unnecessarily cruel and hurtful towards the other.

WG: Have you received a good reception to your book?

ML: So far, yes. I've received very, very positive responses and there isn't any thing quite like it, because virtually every other book aims to prove that one side or the other is the right one. And I just don't hold that, I don't believe that. I believe that both sides were completely screwed up. So I don't buy the narratives and I try to show how you can give a different narrative. So there are many people who are excited about the book, because there's nothing like it.

WG: Yes, it's very bridging, it's a very bridging book. You support the basic principles of the road map – the plan outlined by the US, the United Nations, Europe and Russia – for establishing peace in the Middle East. Could you outline why you think this is a positive step towards resolving this long-standing crisis, as well as what you believe to be its shortcomings?

ML: Well, the main positive aspect is that there is an intervention on the part of other forces, including in this case, the United States. The reason why that's positive is that up till now, a great deal of the negotiations between the two sides was based on the position that the United States and others should leave it to the parties to decide how to resolve this issue. Of course, leaving it to the parties doesn't work because on one side, you have Israel, with a developed military, one of the most highly developed militaries in the whole world and on the other side, you have the Palestinians, who are actually being occupied and their cities being run by the military occupation of the Israeli army. When you are asked to leave it to these parties, what that in effect means is leaving it to Israel to impose its will and the Palestinians to go along or, if they don't go along, then to show that they're bad. So that wasn't working. It wasn't providing any kind of solution, but there was a strong pressure from Israel to say, "leave it to the parties, let the people of the region make their own decisions". But their own decisions were actually just perpetuating the occupation, with its inevitable consequence of perpetuating the violence of the camp of the anti-occupation forces in the Palestinian world. So, the intervention of the rest of the world in saying: "we have some stake here in getting this thing resolved" is a very positive step.

However, the specifics of the road map are not so positive. Because what the specifics of the road map, as currently construed, is to say something like the following: "The Palestinians have to provide for an end to all military struggle against the occupation, and to guarantee the dismantling of all of those forces that have been engaged in armed struggle. The Israelis, in turn, are required only to dismantle some of the more peripheral settlements in the West Bank, and would maintain many of their settlements until the three-year period mandated by this road map was over, at which point there would be a negotiation about the outcome." But the negotiation, again, falls into the same category that I just mentioned, of being a negotiation between the two sides without necessarily any need for Israel to change its particular approach to the occupation. So what the road map was saying to the Palestinians is "Here's what you have to offer to your extremists: tell them to stop fighting and, if they do so, in three years what they'll get is a negotiation." But that is not a very plausible incentive that would likely convince anybody for the need to stop fighting.

So the road map is deeply flawed in that the only way that it could actually work is if the order were reversed and the negotiation for the final outcome was reached first, and then, with that final outcome defined, then to convince people to take the other step towards dismantling armed struggle based on their understanding that they were going to get something that was in fact desirable at the end of the process of dismantling the armed struggle.

WG: Yes, that relates to a quote from a recent *Tikkun* editorial in which it said that “making any path to peace dependent on the cessation of all violence gives a veto to the most extremist elements in both Israel and Palestine.”

ML: It’s actually quite crazy on the face of it because it says to the extremists, “Oh, you guys don’t want a two state solution, right?” Because the Israeli extremists want only an Israeli state that will be occupying all of the West Bank and Gaza, and the Hamas extremists in the Palestinian world want only a Palestinian state, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. So, in both cases, they don’t want a two state solution, they want only one state, namely *their* state. So we say to them, “Oh well, if that’s what you want, we can tell you exactly how you can get it. All you have to do is engage in acts of violence against the other before you promise that we will stop this process. So it’s a completely crazy strategy.

GW: How do you think they should deal with the terrorist activity that’s going on? What would be your suggestion?

ML: Well, we have two suggestions: Number one, we are in favor of bringing an international force in there to separate the two sides and protect each side from the other. I don’t think that terror is going to end as long as the West Bank is occupied by Israel. I think that the only chance for an end to the terror will be an end to the occupation. On the other hand, the Israelis are rightly concerned that an end to the occupation might simply increase the assault on them, and so there needs to be steps taken to ensure them that that’s not what would happen. So that then leads us to call for either an international intervention to create a buffer between the two, or even the possibility, as an interim step, of creating Palestine as a state, at first operating as an international or UN protectorate. But there needs to be some way in which the Palestinian people are protected from the decisions of the Israeli army and the harassment of the Israeli army that has been a factor that has led to deterioration in relationships over the course of the past, at least the past 14 years, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, that Israelis get protection. And so we’re saying that the long-term protection is to create a Palestinian state and let the Palestinian state monitor the terrorists but, in the short run, create a barrier between the two sides in the form of an international presence.

WG: Well, they sound like very helpful, creative ideas. Is anybody in Washington listening to you as a result of your “Teach-in” in early June?

ML: What we’re doing is creating the Tikkun Community, which is our new national organisation, that presents an alternative to AIPAC, the America-Israel Political Affairs Committee, which has been the major force shaping American policy in the Capital. So we had our first gathering – we had 500 people from all over the United States in Washington, June 1-4, and we had over 200 meetings with different congressional offices. So we had a fairly broad representation from a lot of different places, a lot of different congressional districts and, what we found was that there was a great deal of receptivity to an alternative to AIPAC. Of course in the end, the power of AIPAC lies in its money and its ability to identify the candidates they believe should be supported.

We don't yet have the financial base; we don't have the money to be fully effective. So what many of the congressional offices said to us was, "OK, this is great. We agree with you, we would love to have a more balanced perspective on the Middle East, we don't want to be subordinate to AIPAC. However, you've got to convince us in our local areas, in each congressional district, that we're going to be safe if we take an alternative stand that is more supportive of both the rights of Israel, and the rights of the Palestinian people. And so, what we found was that, on the one hand, we had the intellectual perspective that made sense and, on the other hand, they had a political challenge to us that has to be met over the course of the next several years. So if we can create local chapters of Tikkun Community in every congressional district around the United States, then we will be in a position to answer the question, what are we going to do for congresspeople who are putting themselves into jeopardy in relationship to those who are the pro-Ariel Sharon lobby in their own community.

WG: Is that lobby exceedingly strong in this country?

ML: It is very, very powerful, in part because of the money that it has been able to garner in support of candidates who agree with it, in part because the media tells the story of the Middle East in such a way to always blame Palestinians and exonerate Israel and also, in part, because most of the people who recognise that there's something wrong with the occupation, both Jews and non-Jews in the United States, have been intimidated by the willingness of the pro-Ariel Sharon lobby to label as "anti-semitic" anybody who is critical of Israeli policy.

WG: Has *Tikkun* experienced that intimidation?

ML: Yes, we have not only experienced it, but we get death threats every single day in our emails from right-wing Jews who tell us that we are self-hating Jews who are destroying the Jewish people, that we're worse than Hitler, that we're threatening the survival of the Jewish people. And many other Jews are afraid to identify with us for that very reason. And the Tikkun Community is not just for Jews. It's co-chaired by Cornel West, an African-American scholar at Princeton University. It's meant to bring together Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, secular humanists, atheists, anybody who understands the need for a new foundation to politics--a politics based on the recognition of the equal sanctity of every human being on the planet.

WG: You also have a group called Tikkun Campus. Would you tell us about it?

ML: The Tikkun Campus Network is a branch of the Tikkun Community and we've been working on a number of different campuses around the country. We've just started this project and are looking to find students who want to present what we call our "progressive middle path". We call it a middle path because students are often caught between the pro-Israel forces, which we refuse to call "pro-Israel" because, in fact, they are really the pro-Ariel Sharon forces. There are many people who are pro-Israel who don't agree with the so-called "pro-Israel lobby", because it doesn't take into account what's really in Israel's long-term best interest, which is to end the occupation and have friendly and constructive relationships with the Palestinian people.

So they're caught between that, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the pro-Palestinian forces that too often allow themselves to be associated with anti-semitic rhetoric and with a total delegitimation of the rights of the Jewish people to have their own state in that area. So most students are caught in-between these two, and what we're doing is putting forward this progressive middle path which says that you can be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine. So you can see you are not counter-posed and that, in fact, the best interest of Israel will be served by the

creation of a viable and strong and healthy and self-respecting Palestinian state. And that the best interest of Palestine will be served by convincing the Israeli people that they are secure and safe from terrorism. And it's not a zero sum game--these two positions are compatible interests and we are the articulators of that. So we had a national conference of the Tikkun Campus network last fall and this summer we are having a training session, the Tikkun Summer Institute, that will take place at the University of California in Santa Cruz, August 12-15. And then hopefully this next year we will expand the network. There are a number of campuses where groups have been formed and we're looking for other students who understand the value of this middle path.

WG: Are you attempting at all to work with students in Israel and Palestine along the same lines?

ML: No. We're not yet at a point where we can do that. We're just at the point where we're trying to develop it in the United States, although that would be a direction in which we'd like to go. We did have a very amazing event that took place at the University of California at Berkeley, which has been a scene of intense struggle between these two sides, and that was this past May, that is, a month ago. We had a teach-in sponsored by the Tikkun Campus network chapter there, which was attended by over 400 people. The highlight of the teach-in was a panel of Jewish and Israeli students with Arab and Palestinian students. In this panel, each student described their own life-experience and how they had moved from the position of demeaning the other to a position of recognising the humanity of the other. It was an extremely moving set of conversations that reflected the kind of work that we're trying to do on the campuses by bringing together Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs and others to overcome the discourse of demeaning the other and to begin to develop a sense of compassion and mutual understanding.

WG: That sounds very positive. Do you get much attention from the mainstream media for these ideas?

ML: They try to ignore us wherever they can. The founding of the Tikkun Campus network generated a very nice article in Long Island Newsday.

WG: There was an article in the *New York Times* as well.

ML: Yes, also in the *New York Times*. And then this recent conference that we did in D.C. had a very nice article in the *Washington Post*, and a slightly less nice article in the *Washington Times*.

WG: I'd like now to move into some of your broader views. In a recent *Tikkun* article, associate editor Peter Gabel wrote a very interesting article entitled "Spiritualizing Foreign Policy" which outlined some of the fundamental principles related to a new conception of spiritual politics which he then extended to include a spiritual foreign policy. Would you explain the basic principles that underlie such a policy, and if you think such concepts could begin to be realised in your lifetime?

ML: The fundamental underlying understanding is this: we believe that virtually everybody on this planet desires a world based on kindness and generosity and love, and that people desperately want a world in which there is mutual recognition, in which people are recognised for who they are and seen and appreciated for who they are. And that these needs for love, kindness, generosity, and recognition are systematically denied in the contemporary social order, so that instead people are taught that what everyone wants is simply their self-interest, without regard for the well-being of others. They are taught to ignore the fact that most human beings actually want love and caring and kindness and generosity from each other and would love to live in that kind

of world. So our general theory is that a politics that will be transformative is a politics that elicits in people a recognition of their own deep desire, which is very different from saying that we want to instill this desire in people. We believe it is already there and that, in fact, most people, once you begin to talk with them about it, recognise that it is already there, in them. Only they have come to believe that they're the only ones who want it. Or that maybe a small group of friends, or people who are members of their specific religious community, or their specific national grouping, or some segment of the population, shares this with them, but that virtually everyone else is simply out for themselves without regard for the consequences to others and will hurt them if they don't hurt the other first. So basically what we have here is two fundamental world-views that are in conflict: the world-view that says that the world is a hostile place made up of people who are seeking to gain power over you to advance their own interest, without regard for the consequences to you or to anyone else and, on the other hand, a different world view that originally was rooted in the spiritual traditions of the human race, that recognises the common humanity of all, and asserts that most human beings actually would want a world based on kindness and love and generosity. These two views have been in contention for the last several thousand years and, in most people, both views are part of their consciousness and they're in contention all the time. So there are historical moments in which the more hopeful view emerges and, when that one gets priority in our consciousness, then more and more people begin to act to confirm that way. They act in ways that are cooperative, mutually supportive, loving, generous, and then you get a flowering of a hopeful energy. That happened to some extent in the 1930s, to some extent in the 1960s, and it's happened throughout history. But most of the time it's the other consciousness that is in ascendancy, and that is the consciousness that says, no, we live in a world described by the English philosopher Hobbes, who said that life is mean, brutish, and short, and it's filled with a competition of "all against all". And that that's the essential state of nature from which we seek to escape. So, in that world view, the world is very scary and the only way that we can achieve safety and security is through dominating others, because otherwise they will dominate us. So when that becomes more in ascendancy, people think less in terms of generosity and kindness and more in terms of police forces and armies and wars, preventive wars to dominate the other before they dominate you. And so these two consciousnesses are in conflict, most people have both in their heads, and so our strategy is to try to find ways to affirm the more hopeful part of peoples' consciousness, and to disconfirm the more fearful part. And that's the overall strategy of the Tikkun Community, the underlying understanding of politics. Because unlike those who talk about politics as though it was simply based on material interests, we believe that there is a countervailing interest that people have in a world of kindness and generosity and love and mutual recognition. And it is fostering that side of people that makes it possible for them to move to challenge the ethos of selfishness and materialism. So when you translate this into foreign policy, it means that instead of imagining that the way that the United States would achieve security in the world is by wiping out or, in other ways, taking power over those who might be potential rivals or those who might challenge the power of global capital, we argue that the way to achieve security for the United States is to develop cooperative and caring relationships with the rest of the world. And the first step in that, that I articulated at the Tikkun teach-in to Congress, is to call for a massive global Marshall Plan, in which the advanced countries of the world, the advanced industrial countries of the world, would allocate 10% of their GNP each year toward the task of rebuilding the infra-structure and economic viability and ecological sustainability of the poorer countries on the planet.

WG: That's a very uplifting idea. Do you think these things can be realised?

ML: Well, they can be. Whether they will be depends on the choices that people make. Will people gravitate toward the Tikkun Community or will they stay enmeshed in a politics that doesn't speak to anyone but a small group of people? We're speaking a language here that is

aimed at reaching out to many Americans who normally have nothing to do with progressive causes and in fact, who often feel that the progressives hate them or disdain them. We have a different attitude. We believe that most Americans have a fundamentally decent core, and that even though many of them get attracted to right-wing movements, often the reason they get attracted to those movements are good reasons rather than bad reasons, that is that those right-wing movements articulate values and visions that speak to the deepest hunger people have for a world based on love and caring and generosity. Ironically, the left and progressive movements tend to speak more in terms of economic and political entitlements and rights. And that doesn't speak deeply enough to the hunger that people have, a hunger that in my view is generated in part by the fundamentalist dynamics of the capitalist marketplace. Yet, the left and progressive forces have not been able to address that hunger and often have dismissed any talk of this sort as flaky spirituality. And because they don't understand the hunger that people have for a different spiritual reality, they think that spirituality is a right-wing issue, or is intellectually vacuous. And as a result, they've given over to the right a great number of people who might have responded to a more progressive vision had that progressive vision been articulated with a clear connection to a spiritual vision.

WG: How do you deal with the progressives in your work? Do you try to elicit their support, or do you just work separately from them?

ML: Both. We are creating our own organisation, the Tikkun Community, with our own vision and articulation, and it often turns out that our one organisation is far more effective than big coalitions of progressive organisations that have lots and lots of organisations working together, but all they spend their time doing is arguing with each other. My experience is that progressive organisations are filled with people who are so sure that nobody will listen to them that they don't want to go out and do any of the hard work outreach to people who are not already agreeing with them. So they formulate their politics and the style in which they operate in ways that guarantee that only other people who already share their perspective will be in dialogue with them. And that has led us to say that our primary concern is not outreach to progressives, but to everyone else. On the other hand, whenever possible we want to work with progressives as well, but we want to do it without compromising the kind of balance that we have with regard to Israel, as well as a spiritual language that we use in talking about American politics.

WG: That leads into my next question. You are a rabbi and clearly a spiritual worldview is something that is very important to you. Would you be willing to tell us a little about your spiritual faith and how it influences your life and work? Is there anything you'd like to say about your own spirituality?

ML: I've been involved in trying to develop the Jewish Renewal Movement, a movement which has sought to reclaim the fundamental message of the Torah which is that there is a force in the universe – in English it's translated as "God" – that makes possible the transformation of the world from that which is to that which ought to be. That means that the universe is not neutral but actually supports and tilts towards the evolution of consciousness, towards higher and higher levels of freedom, interconnection, love and kindness. And this is built into the structure of the universe in such a way that the loving energies of the universe are becoming, and will become, more and more embodied in the human race or in whatever evolves past the human race. So that's the kind of faith element. The practice element is that I personally engage in prayer and meditation each day and then have the Sabbath, which is one day each week that is dedicated totally toward celebration of the universe rather than focused on changing the universe and making it different, or getting control over it. So from Friday night, an hour before dark until Saturday night after the stars come out, that Sabbath is a time for total withdrawal from the

consciousness of domination and control over the world. And I find that an extremely valuable spiritual practice, which makes it possible for me to have the focussed time on developing awe and wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation. It's a type of consciousness that I try to bring it into the rest of the week, but which really needs this concentrated time to develop. So it's a 25 hour meditation each week that is, I find, extremely powerful and compelling, and gives me the ability to then return to the struggle for healing and transformation of the world with inner resources renewed.

WG: Various religious faiths believe that we are approaching the time of a reappearance of a messiah or a world teacher. And I know this is a belief that is part of the Jewish faith. Some people have said that in some mysterious way this entire conflict in the Middle East, a holy land for so many of the world's people, is intimately related to the arrival of a great Teacher. Have you any thoughts about this?

ML: Most people in the Jewish Renewal Movement don't really believe that there's going to be a particular teacher. We are much more concerned about embodying the messianic energies in as many people as possible. There is a slogan that has become popular in our movement, it says: "There is no messiah, and you're it!"

WG: That's a good message! Thank you so much for giving us this time and sharing with us your thoughts.