

R. Michael Lerner – Embracing Israel/Palestine

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It has been reading Michael Lerner's book [*Embracing Israel/Palestine: A Strategy to Heal and Transform the Middle East*](#) during the week of Israeli Independence Day. The establishment of a Jewish homeland has been the single most important positive historical fact of my lifetime as a Jew. If ever there was a latter day miracle this was it. I would do almost anything for its survival. So some of you may wonder why of all people I chose to read him this week.

Michael Lerner is the founder and rabbi of [the Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley, California](#), and a founding editor of [Tikkun Magazine](#). He is the leading representative of liberal, universal, humanitarian Judaism and is respected on the national stage. He has travelled a long and arduous path championing a tolerant, moderate, and open-minded worldview. And because he argues for compromise in pursuit of peace and reconciliation in Israel, he is dismissed by right-wing maximalist Jews. When I ran Yakar in London I invited him to come and speak. I found him engaging and sincere, and found his use of traditional sources to support his arguments impressive.

So why is it we so dislike people who have the guts to express unpopular opinions? Is it because of that old aphorism that you can't be a prophet in your own city? Biblical prophets were lonely people. Jeremiah ended up in jail just for his views. They have always stood up for the rights of the poor and the oppressed, and condemned corruption and the hypocrisies of society; for this they were condemned.

So I was glad to have the opportunity to read a book Michael Lerner published a few years ago about the Israel/Palestine issue because I wanted to know if I would agree with him or not. I want to state unambiguously, that there is nothing in his book that I would disagree with. Yet, in the end, I found it unsatisfactory.

Lerner fairly sets out both narratives against each other. He tries and succeeds, in being fair, in recognizing pain, mistakes, cruelties, and missed opportunities on both sides. He believes both sides suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (in the Jewish case for two-thousand years) that blinds them to errors and misjudgments, some obviously much more morally questionable than others. In both camps there are balanced, reasoned opinions and there are extreme, fanatical ones. The world thinks in clichés, but the reality is full of complexities and varieties. In the end, both sides know they will have to compromise.

The blame game is pointless. Perhaps one side did refuse to negotiate. Perhaps the other did fail to nurture good relations when it could have. Perhaps one side has a Supreme Court that has failed and the other doesn't

even have any system of justice. One side might preach hate, and one side might humiliate. Calling on holy textual authority only works if both sides accept the same texts. Dredging up broken promises will achieve nothing, any more than trying to offset Deir Yassin against Gush Etzion, or Palestinian exiles against Sefardi exiles. In the end, peace will only come when both sides want it badly enough. At this moment, clearly, both sides do not.

Perhaps the Palestinians think they can get a better deal. As for Israel, it does not trust Hamas, Islamic Jihad or the fanatics of the wider Middle Eastern environment it finds itself in, who commit such terrible atrocities against each other. You might even argue that both peoples have been and are being let down by their politicians and indeed by the world.

I admire Lerner's willingness to insist on an unpopular position because he believes it is right. We need such voices. We always need to have our positions challenged. He is driven by a vision of Judaism that I share, what he calls the restorative rather than the defensive (though he calls it "settler Judaism", which I think is unfair and wrong). We should be trying to make the world a better place instead of only thinking in defensive terms. Sadly we live in a world of murder and prejudice, where world opinion is heavily tilted against Israel for all kinds of reasons; theological, political, and psychological. A defensive person tightens inwards; he doesn't open up.

We may often be our own worst enemies. But in the end, just as I will put my loved ones first, so too will I seek to defend my people first. We are indeed tribal, we humans. I would love to see internationalism overcome nationalism. Judaism can survive, in theory, in a common market where everyone has equal rights. We do in the USA, after all. But for as long as the world around us remains tribal, we must inevitably support our own tribe first.

If this were just an abstract conflict of policies, one could indeed hope to find reconciliation. If it were simply a European imperialist interloper, as were the whites in South Africa, then overcoming the oppressors would be the only way. But this is different because of ancient cultural bonds. If conquest was the original sin, then where does one begin or end the ancient cycle? Does one return the land to the Canaanites?

This is why I find a purely neutral position like Lerner's right and just, but unsatisfactory. I am biased, prejudiced in favor of my own people. I have lived through the trauma of almost every door being shut in our faces. I have known the possibility of extermination of not just of some, but possibly of all my people. Whatever one may say about the Palestinians, neither they nor the Muslim religion faces extermination. So yes, I am biased. We have been so traumatized for two thousand years that if I have a chip on my shoulder. I just do not have the confidence to let go of it. All those people across the world and from different cultures screaming for our extermination does not give me confidence.

That doesn't mean we should not pursue peace. The process itself might help reconciliation, and it certainly does not mean we should turn blind eyes to injustice. But it does mean that if there are billions howling against us, we

need our few millions to stand by us. Too many of the Israeli and Jewish critics sound bitter and angry, rather than sad.

Lerner suggests peacekeepers to protect a deal. But where have we seen examples of peacekeepers succeeding? Rely on the USA? Having seen this administration's well-meant but ineffectual red lines, I no longer have that confidence. I do desperately want to see peace. But more than that I want my people to survive. There are enormous challenges and dangers. But I may be forgiven my realism. In support of it, I quote the former leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and former Leader of the Official Opposition, [Michael Ignatieff](#):

“I cannot help thinking that liberal civilization—the rule of law, not men, of argument in place of force, of compromise in place of violence—runs deeply against the human grain and is achieved and sustained only by the most unremitting struggle against human nature.”

We must undertake that struggle. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. But we should not let our guard down in the process. We have no one to rely on except ourselves, and of course Heaven. It is up to politicians to find a way of protecting the state while resolving the long-term issues. It is for people of vision to inspire them.