

# Tolerance

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Tolerance only works if it goes both ways.

At Muhammad Ali's funeral, Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of Tikkun Magazine and the Network of Spiritual Progressives, gave a stirring speech that was roundly applauded. I agree with almost everything he said. We must stop victimizing, generalizing, and hating people who are different in color, creed, and practice. We live in a world where power corrupts. Inequality and exploitation are everywhere and infiltrate every ideology, religion, and creed. Racism, victimization, greed, and violence pervade every society. Obviously, some more than others. Otherwise no one would ever want to move to a different country for a better quality of life and greater freedom.

The message that Rabbi Lerner advocated was the message of every idealist. We must love our neighbors. Do unto others as we would be done by. Yet for some reason, despite technological, scientific, and humanitarian progress, despite a reduction in poverty, an increase in food production, welfare systems, huge charitable enterprises, and benevolence, we are still way, way off achieving what we have been preaching. We still live in a world of either imperfect or evil regimes. But we still yearn for freedom, equality, friendship, and benevolence. We like the good. But we are not all capable of pursuing it.

Muhammad Ali was a remarkable character as well as a brilliant athlete. No one is perfect. Not even him. He picked up too many anti-white and anti-Zionist hate tropes from mentors Malcolm X and Farrakhan. But he fought for his people and for freedom. How ironic that he had a Jewish grandson and went to his bar mitzvah. But still, it is so important, and after Orlando even more so, to use every opportunity to speak out against racism and prejudice and that was what Rabbi Lerner rightly did.

I was pleased that he went to the funeral. It was, in its way, a Kiddush HaShem, even if he had absolutely no right to say he was representing American Jewry. It seems any rabbi who gets exposure claims that nowadays. But I am sorry he so overtly politicized his message by spouting left-wing Bernie nostras as if they would solve the problems of the world, let alone America.

Governments that want to create a utopia often have to concede that they either do not have the financial means or the population to achieve it. We all want it in theory, on our terms. Since the days of Plato and his Republic, we have dreamed and planned, but we are still a long way off. With our societies we have the idealists and the pragmatists, the capitalists and the socialists, and no one system is perfect or has ever been. But still we must dream, we should dream, and we need to be reminded of our dreams.

In all my days in the rabbinate, whenever I was stuck for a sermon I knew I could always fall back on preaching ideals, excoriating those who betray our

ideals, standing against hypocrisy. And after every such sermon someone would always come up to me and say, "Rabbi, great sermon, you really gave it to them today." Or words to that effect. It was always, "You told them." It was never, "You told me."

On the same day as Ali's funeral, an American Muslim wrote in the New York Times about how his young daughter was picked on in a restaurant for wearing a headscarf. He ended by wondering why we hate people for their religion or race. Yes, of course I agreed, because I wonder why so many Muslims and Christians still hate Jews for being Jews, or hate people of different sexual orientation. We are so good at seeing the mote in the eyes of others, but not the beam in our own. Or as the Talmud says (Bava Batra 15b), "Don't tell me to do something about my toothpick when you have a whole plank of wood to deal with."

So I ask myself, why in his speech did Lerner have to focus on Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and not Sunni Shia internecine conflicts which Ali felt equally strongly about, human rights in China and Russia, occupation in Tibet, Kashmir, or West Sahara, or Turkey's treatment of Kurds or North Korea? Why did he not excoriate the left wing ideology that Chavez and Maduro have destroyed Venezuela with? Or indeed Cuba? Does he think there is no need for self-examination other than for Jews? Why no reciprocity? Did Israel start the wars? Do Israelis really not want peace desperately? Is there no other side to the argument?

We now live in a world of rights. Do not Jews have rights too? Were Rabbi Lerner's comments about Netanyahu just to pander to an audience that, at core, is now sadly so anti-Israel and anti-Semitic as to deny rights to Jews to defend themselves? he could have said that almost half of Israel opposes many of his policies and rhetoric. He spoke about how once Jew stood shoulder-to-shoulder with black civil rights leaders. He did not speak about why today anti-Semitism is so prevalent in black societies. Why Black Lives Matter has chosen to add Palestine to their agenda rather than any one of the other humanitarian causes with far greater casualties elsewhere in the world today. If Martin Luther King had been present, he would not have been so one-sided.

Of course the Israeli Left, indeed any Left, has the right and should have the right to take whatever side it wants to. Of course excess, corruption, and inhumanity must be addressed. But one who excoriates Jews wherever they are, should have the honesty and morality to point out another point of view others political correctness and one sidedness simply debases the debate. Why does no one mention the protests in Palestinian territory against the policies of their dogmatists and kleptocracy? When you pick on just one example, on just one argument, that is pure prejudice.

Not only, but look at how Lerner's speech was reported—not as a critique of racism or prejudice wherever it comes from. Look on the internet and see the headlines "Rabbi Slams Israel in Muhammad Ali Funeral Speech." Yes, just more fodder for the Jew-haters. He could have made all his major ethical points without having to pander to the tub-thumping anti-Israel, anti-Jewish amen chorus that has now taken over the Left (not to mention the Right) wherever it exists.

The same trope. Remove Israel and the Middle East will be peaceful. Sunni and Shia will love each other, as well as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals. The Left has always had rose-colored spectacles. Remove the Kulaks, then the aristocrats, then the bourgeoisie, then the Jews, and Russia will be paradise. Remove capitalists, and we will live in heaven. Remove religion, and we will get in with each other, make love, and we will all live happily ever after.

Life is not like that. I am glad Rabbi Lerner stands for what he stands. We need contrarians and prophets. But my experience tells me that any dogma can be dangerous, any one sided argument is doomed.

All I seek is balance. By all means, criticize Netanyahu if you also criticize Abu Mazen. By all means attack Israel if you also attack Hamas, Hezbollah, and all the others who put war above human needs and human rights. Rabbi Lerner can and should demand rights. But I can demand mine too.