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Do Not Ask Israel to Aton

By Mordechai Gafni

An Open Letter to Michael Lerner

Dear Michael,

I am deeply disturbed by the content and tone of your critique of Israel since the beginning of the latest crisis. I say that without rancor; I love you both as a friend and a colleague, and believe you to be sincere and true to your convictions. However, in the words of the Talmud, love without reproof is not love; the more authentic the relationship, at times the sharper the critique and the greater the disappointment.

I don't have the space here to fully restate your narrative, but I will cite several salient points which I find most distorted and then try to share an alternative narrative which I think exposes the critical weaknesses in the story you spin. Before I begin, however, let me say that I am proud to count you among my people and that when the Palestinians have Michael Lerner's and TIKKUN magazines, then peace will indeed be at hand.

First, although you pay half a sentence of lip service to Palestinian culpability, it is clear from your tone and explicit statement that "the preponderance of responsibility [for the current crisis] lies with Israel." For example, despite your brief expression of rage at the brutal lynching of the two Israeli reservists at Ramallah, your very next sentence reads, "Yet I can also understand that to those Palestinians these two young men killed were just members of the occupying army that had been brutally killing eighty Palestinians and wounding more than 2,000 civilians." If that is not a backhanded justification of the lynching, then I don't know what is; and the very general denouncement later in your article of Palestinian violence cannot not justify your justification. You cannot eat Boston cream pie as your main course and then have lettuce for desert and claim you are on a diet!

You argue (at best) for a sort of moral equivalence between the Palestinians and Israelis, saying that the lynch mob "might have seemed indistinguishable from the Jewish mobs that attacked random Arab Israelis in Nazareth.... For every outrage on one side there is a story of outrage on the other." Michael, you must know that moral equivalency is our century's new form of "the great lie."

The second lynchpin of your argument seems to be that the settlers and Barak are to blame. Barak's offer of 90 percent of the West Bank plus sovereignty or United Nations control of religious sites in Jerusalem, is, you claim, really just a sham. Since the Israelis would still control some of the roads and the Jordan valley, you say, Barak's proposal is a bad deal for the Palestinians. "Nationalist fanatics," your term for the settlers, would "continue their history of violence." Since nothing has really changed, you say, Palestinian rage is justified and "the preponderance of blame is with the Israelis."

Michael, this is all so wildly untrue that I almost don't know where to start responding.

First, you assume that the fact that the Palestinians did not get everything they wanted is because of some evil Israeli intention which you, amazingly, call racist. Michael, you forget what neighborhood we live in here; the Middle East is not the Midwest or Berkeley. To not control the roads and the strategic Jordan valley would-according to virtually every Israeli political and military analyst-put Israel in mortal danger. Thomas Friedman, Cynthia Ozick, and the overwhelming majority of the left-leaning camp in Israel have all echoed emphatically what Clinton said at Camp David: Barak made the best offer any Israeli government has made, or could be expected to make, without committing national suicide.

Michael, you forget or choose to ignore that Israel absorbed millions of refugees from around the world, including 700,000 from the Arab states. You forget or choose to ignore that the Arab refugees have been used by their countrymen and by the surrounding Arab nations as a deliberate, cruel, and cynical propaganda tool. They have been forced for over fifty years to stay in the camps, being fed diets of hate instead of the nourishment of hope and peace which is their right.

You forget or choose to ignore what Arafat and his senior officials have said in print-in Arabic of course--time and again, that when they talk of the liberation of Palestine, they mean all of Israel, including Tel Aviv, Hertziliya, Rechovot, Safed, and Tiberias. The promisers of a holy war to free "all of Palestine" explicitly list virtually every major city in Israel as being the direct object of "bloody Jihad."

Michael, you would have us believe that things have changed. Yet you forget that Israel is treated as nonexistent on Palestinian maps, television broadcasts, and textbooks. You forget that hate is the clearly documented fare of choice in Palestinian schools. You forget that Arafat and his top officials not only deny the Holocaust consistently and overtly but deny that there was ever a Temple in Jerusalem. They accuse us of falsifying much of our own history.

For Plato, ignorance is the source of all evil. For biblical consciousness, the loss of memory--the denial of history--is the ultimate source of evil. To create a selective narrative, to tell a distorted story--not to know the story of leaving Egypt--that is to distort political history. That is always the precursor of evil of the very worst kind.

Now about the settlers. With the exception of a tiny group of extremists, you must be aware that the overwhelming majority of settlers are wonderful, moral, everyday decent people. The majority are not religious, and certainly are not nationalist fanatics, and have absolutely no interest in violence against Palestinians. Your painting the settlers as gross villains is both distorting and profoundly offensive to one who lived, walked, loved, and laughed with the settlers for many years. You must know that deep relationships of trust, as well as extensive programs of agricultural aid, medical training, educational development, and the like, were initiated by the settlers in conjunction with their neighboring Arab villages. Virtually every time, these initiatives were brutally destroyed by the PLO, who again and again perpetrated atrocities against their own people.

Michael, I was a settler for three years. I built a settlement a stone's throw from Kalkilya. We had wonderful relations with the people and leadership of Kalkilya. With deep, intimate, human

contact we shared our conversation, our hopes, and our dreams. That is, until what we then called the PLO began cutting off the testicles of the people who talked to us, murdering their daughters, shooting their sons in the stomach, and leaving them to die. This was the same Palestinian leadership that executed people in Lebanon--when they had a PLO mini-state there--by tying them to four jeeps and ripping them apart.

You must know, Michael, that the Arab Muslim attempt to destroy Israel has nothing to do with the settlers. Indeed, the issue at its core may have nothing to do with Israel at all. A dangerous fundamentalist Islam--a distortion of so much that is noble and beautiful in Islam--is spreading like wildfire all over the world. Throughout the Third World, horrible violence is seen as a legitimate tool in overthrowing non-Muslim governments. Sudan regularly sells non-Muslim women and children as slaves. Much of Nigeria has recently enacted Muslim law and people are justly terrified of what is to come. Muslims fight for the Kashmir. Muslim Albanians have "spiritually cleansed" 80 percent of the Serb population. In Indonesia, Muslims in Jihad have attacked and massacred Christian villages. The Philippine Muslim rebels are also engaged in Jihad. Almost all of the Jihad movements are funded by Arab states and view themselves--as a function of their faith--as implacable foes of Israel. Muslim militia from all over the world stand poised to come fight in a holy war to free Jerusalem from the infidels. While it is important to note that, thus far, Egypt and Jordan have withstood fundamentalist Muslim pressure, I am hard pressed to see how they can hold out in the long run. I truly hope I am wrong.

Michael, the settlers are not the problem. It is a dangerous, though understandably seductive, illusion to think that if only there were no settlers, it would all be okay.

Michael, perhaps you did not read the recent article in the Palestinian Authority's daily paper, written by its editor, Hafez Bargutti, promising revenge and murder to all parents who refuse to send their ten- and twelve-year-old children to the front lines of the demonstrations. All who will not martyr their children are deemed evil transgressors. This is what Jihad looks like when it comes to Israel.

Michael, you talk about the "brutal murder" of 80 people and the wounding of 2000 civilians. My students, calling me from patrol, have often described scenes similar to that published by a USA Today reporter who spent a day on the front lines in the West Bank. First, lines of children are sent with stones to hurl at the Israeli troops. In that first wave, several automatic weapons are usually fired from amongst the children. Then ambulances pull up on the overlooking ridges and behind the children, distributing molotov cocktails, weapons, and more stones. Finally, Palestinians from within the ambulances open fire on the troops with automatic weapons.

Michael, you know that Arafat has consistently used civilians as expendable tools. You know there are training camps which train the child martyrs. You must know that the Israeli army, although clearly not perfect, is the most moral army in the world under the most difficult of circumstances. You know that a level of restraint is almost consistently exhibited by our soldiers in conditions where life and limb are at risk every second. Yes, Michael, there are exceptions, there are lapses--there are a minuscule group of Israelis who have visited Baruch Goldstein's grave. However, the overwhelming majority of the Israeli population deplores Baruch Goldstein. In contrast, the Arabs who ripped apart the soldiers in Ramallah are national heroes.

Despite the abuses which you point out and I hope continue to point out, the Arab minority in Israel, which in all polls is largely hostile to Israel, has prospered in a way unmatched in any even vaguely similar situation, at any time in history, anywhere in the world. Walk into an Israeli hospital and you will see it filled with Arabs getting the same care as Jews. As it should be. But can you imagine, Michael, you or any other Jew consistently going for care at an Arab hospital? The list of such asymmetric anomalies is virtually endless.

You assume, Michael, that Israel has no claim over the West Bank and that, therefore, any encroachment on Palestinian demands is somehow pernicious or evil. The overwhelming majority of Israelis--left and right--intelligent, highly moral, and good people, sharply disagree with you. We feel that we have a claim to the West Bank which is far stronger than the Palestinian claim, but we are willing to forfeit most of our claim for the sake of a lasting peace. We are willing to take enormous security risks and to give up the heartland of our country. Compromise means that both sides give up part of their fair claim.

Michael, you must know that there has never been a Palestinian state; that the Palestinians are indistinguishable from the rest of the Arab world; that Arafat is an Egyptian, and that the initial goal of the PLO was to unite Israel-Palestine with Syria. You must know that the fundamental and clearly stated goal of Palestinian nationalism is "to eradicate the Jews from Palestine" (i.e., all of Israel). This is the current position--expressed much more than once in the Arabic-Palestinian press--long before the present outbreak of violence.

If I had room in this article, I would include a list of literally hundreds of programs initiated by Israel to build bridges of genuine communication and peace with the Palestinians. There are virtually no such Palestinian organizations. Is this coincidence or an indication of something profoundly asymmetric going on in the region?

Michael, if I am wrong, then correct me, and I will be happy to admit any error. If there is anything in what I have written that rings true, please share that with me as well. Looking forward to many more years of friendship and holy God wrestling.

I remain

Warmly,

Mordechai

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