

# Loving the Jewish Community Means Supporting Justice

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Supporting justice in the current crisis in the Middle East is not easy. The issues are painful for any Jew to face. Criticizing Israel comes at a huge emotional cost for all of us who were raised to love her. And when we do, we meet a wall of denial, hostility, and rage. Yet if we truly love Israel and the Jewish people, we must speak and act against the policies of the Israeli government.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine is a huge injustice. I have recently returned from spending time in occupied Palestine. I have witnessed the siege of the Balata refugee camp, seeing with my own eyes the level of ongoing repression and humiliation that the occupation entails. I could detail the abuses I saw, and what may be worse, the way the occupation is a constant, relentless assault on any sense of hope or safety, any possibility of normal life.

What I want to tell now, though, is not this story of oppression, but what happens when we tell this story. We expect to receive the usual denunciations and death threats from the opposition: Tikkun has received plenty of these threats, many of them directed against its editor, Rabbi Michael Lerner. What hurts even more, though, is the criticism that comes from friends and allies who tell us that we are being too provocative, arousing too much anger and hate, not being loving enough toward the Jewish community.

The question is, how can we be truly loving to the Jewish community under these conditions? Real love speaks truth, even if that truth is unwelcome. Real love challenges the beloved to be her or his truest possible self. We cannot love the Jewish community by condoning injustice or colluding with abuse. The most unloving thing we could do for Judaism is to accept its identification with current Israeli policies. Loving the Jewish people may mean calling them to our deepest and fullest understanding of God. If the Jewish God is truly a God of Justice, it's the ultimate insult to Judaism to imply that He would condone and sanction a great injustice. A Jewish state cannot be sustained by unjust actions and remain Jewish.

If Judaism is the worship of one God who created the whole universe, we cannot imagine that God cherishes only the Jews. A monotheistic God must also be the father/mother of the Palestinians, for how could a loving God who is All create a people separated from God? A God who is God of the Jews and not of the Arabs would be merely a tribal godlet, a cosmic football fan rooting always for only one team. To worship such a God would truly be idolatry. We cannot love Judaism by accepting a diminished concept of God; we cannot accept God as being any less than the great, pulsing, life-generating force of creativity and compassion that reverberates through all

human beings and through the universe.

Loving the Jewish community may also mean challenging what it means to be a member of that community. Who decided that "real Jews" support Ariel Sharon, while those who dissent are somehow less Jewish? The essence of anti-Semitism is the portrayal of the Jews as one monolithic whole. Real Jews are actually hugely diverse -- politically, spiritually, and culturally. One of the loving things we can do for the Jewish community and to counter the very real anti-Semitism that does exist is to embody that diversity, to be a strong, loud, clear, and Jewish voice that can also champion the rights of Palestinians to peace and hope and life.

It would not be loving toward the Jewish community to allow certain factions to silence all criticism of Israel by screaming "anti-Semitism." For the more we use that charge to fend off valid criticism, the more we undercut its power and validity, and the less likely we are to be listened to when we face true anti-Semitism.

Real anti-Semitism does exist, but so does Jewish racism against Palestinians. And it would not be loving of the Jewish community to allow that prejudice to continue unchallenged, to accept the picture of the Palestinian community as a monolith of mindless hate. When we see the Palestinian community as an undifferentiated enemy, we fall into hopelessness and despair, for how can we make peace with "animals"? The truth, however, is that the Palestinians are not some mindless force of evil, they are real human beings. Among their community, just as in the Jewish community, are people who hate and people who love; broad-minded, tolerant people and narrow, prejudiced people; people who love war and people who want peace; people who want to die and those who want to live. The more we can see the Palestinians as real human beings, the more hope we can find in the situation. We can then begin to strategize about how to foster a climate that discourages hate, instead of feeding it as the current policies do. We can begin to envision the possibility of a just peace and reconciliation.

When Jewish peace activists speak out in a truly loving way, we will undoubtedly be met with anger, rage, even real hatred. But we are not creating that hate. I can think of no way we can speak in a truly loving voice that will not evoke anger, because we are saying things people do not want to hear, speaking truths that challenge comfortable assumptions and self-righteousness and that which is always hardest to face, the justifications that we use to ease our conscience when we know we are doing wrong. In Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he writes about the criticisms he received from fellow ministers for being too confrontational and provocative. And he says that nonviolence is not about avoiding conflict, but about heightening it until those who have always refused to negotiate are forced to do so. He too preached love, but had to withstand the venomous hate of the Southern segregationists. And yet the movement he was part of succeeded in changing a deeply entrenched, oppressive system. Nonviolence is the art of provoking confrontation that can lead to change, the willingness to directly confront oppression and absorb violence without retaliating or passing the violence on, and the belief that ultimately truth will win and even bitter opponents will reconcile.

Political change almost always comes through some level of conflict and confrontation, violent or nonviolent, because, as King also says, those who hold power and privilege

rarely relinquish it voluntarily.

Essentially, we are asking the Jewish community to give up its position of privilege, both because it is morally right to do so, and because it is ultimately in our community's self-interest to do so. That message challenges our self-conception as victims. We have been victims over and over again for 2000 years; in this case, however, we have also become the victimizers, and no one enjoys having that pointed out. The only way to break through this denial is to tell the truth, strongly and clearly but with compassion, and then withstand the storm that results. People give up privilege when it becomes too costly and uncomfortable to hold on to it. A nonviolent strategy for change involves causing discomfort, making the inherent violence in the system visible and arousing moral condemnation of the violence, dramatizing the injustice, heightening the social and political costs of continuing the system, and ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the current system and its supporters. We break through the wall of denial by making it too uncomfortable for people to shelter behind it.

Our task is not to convince those who are actively and bitterly opposed to us. They will be the last to change.

I see the task as threefold:

Mobilize Jews who oppose the occupation to become more visible, vocal, and active, to take greater risks and become a strong, cohesive, and powerful voice for justice. Provide a rallying beacon for all those who are uncomfortable with the current situation but have not yet formulated a position. We must show how current policies run counter to true Jewish ideals and interests and set new terms for the debate. Provide information and education to those who are not informed, and create enough drama and urgency that the apathetic have a reason to want that information. And, please, stay alive and healthy while doing so. We've had enough martyrs!

So, let's imagine some possibilities:

Suppose we continue to speak out honestly, fearlessly, and lovingly, without worrying about the reactions we'll get. Many people will respond negatively, vilify us, spread vicious rumors and lies, etc.

But we'll simply continue to speak the truth, without retaliation, without wasting our energy defending ourselves against ridiculous allegations, just saying with deep compassion, "I know many people don't want to hear this truth, but my God is a God of justice and only the path of justice leads to a viable future for the Jewish people." For every person ready to brand us traitors, there are probably ten people out there who are confused, who sense that there is something deeply wrong and don't know what to do or say about it, or who already know it's wrong and just feel hopeless and despairing. This group includes many Israelis as well. Staunch Zionists won't be convinced, but the vast legions of these Jews who are already uncomfortable about the issue will hear us and think, "Thank God there is a Jewish voice actually telling the truth!" Then the next task will be to get them to coalesce into a coherent force that can be a counterweight to the current self-defined "mainstream" Jewish community. If we can do that, the world will see that Jews are not a monolithic voice on this issue, that

there is a strong Jewish movement for justice. It will help undercut the very real anti-Semitism that is resurging today, and strengthen the position of those who deplore both anti-Semitism and the injustice of the occupation. It will also give some hope to the Palestinians, and encouragement to those within their community who don't want to hate Jews, who do separate Israeli policy from Judaism, who still yearn to believe in the possibility of peace. It will lay some groundwork for future reconciliation, and help strengthen the Israeli peace movement.

This is an optimistic scenario, but I believe it is perfectly possible. Perhaps this is once again an era of prophecy. This is a time when we need to speak with a moral voice, in the voice of those ancient prophets calling the community to a deeper and fuller conception of God. Tikkun has begun the work of Isaiah and Jeremiah -- it is time for more of us to join their ranks.

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