

Jews vs. Jews: Dissenting on Israeli policy

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The violence between Israelis and Palestinians is once again in the forefront of the news. Those who support Israel see themselves defending it against the prophesied destruction of the nation and the Jewish people. Palestinian supporters witness for a people who have been denied the basic human need for dignity and statehood. The dualism is stark. To be for one side is to be against the other, and from the perspective of Israel's defenders, to speak on behalf of Palestinians is to desire the annihilation of the state of Israel.

American Jewish leaders have called for unity on behalf of Israel, effectively announcing open season on Jews who are critical of Israeli policy. The *New York Times* has been filled with full-page advertisements calling for Jewish unity. Pro-Israel marches have been held in New York City and elsewhere. Rabbinic e-mail lists buzz with words about Jewish "troublemakers" like Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun*. Lerner opposes the militarization of the Jewish tradition and is extremely critical of Israeli policies toward Palestinians. This criticism has increased in recent months. The possibility that Lerner actually represents a sizable minority of Jews is unthinkable to many Jewish leaders, especially in localities where Jews are small in number and an isolationism pervades thought and discourse.

Some Jews are concerned about the loss of an ethical compass in Jewish life. The sight of Israeli helicopter gunships firing missiles into Palestinian cities is so great a contradiction in Jewish ethics and history that thoughts are bound to be diverse and to seek public expression. Some Jews hear in Lerner's words an echo of their own heart: "The present situation leaves us saddened. We are saddened by the anger and loss of support we face for our willingness to speak the truth as we see it. We are saddened by the pathetic state of the Israeli left and by its lack of coherent vision or strategy. But most of all we are saddened by the endless suffering imposed on the Palestinian people in the name of the Jewish people, sometimes with the active cooperation of those who claim to speak in the name of God. From our

standpoint, this is the ultimate *chillul hashem*, desecration of God's name."

Of course, if the liberal but pro-Zionist Lerner is a problem, the difficulty runs much deeper. Those Jews associated with movements of Jewish renewal, which seek to rescue the stale status quo of contemporary institutional expression and look to a future Judaism of alternative worship, discussion and social justice, are equally vilified. One wonders where the problem ends or whether it even can end. Belligerent defense of Israeli policies may only succeed in bringing outright war closer to Israel and heightening the verbal war inside the American Jewish world. It can hardly help guide Israel to a more rational and critical view of its own history and its paltry offerings of symbolism and limited autonomy to Palestinians.

The current debates within American Judaism constitute an unexpected revisitation of territory already traversed. The *intifada* years of 1987-1991, when the Jewish world divided over the meaning and legitimacy of the Palestinian uprising, were thought long gone, buried by the 1993 Oslo Accords and the road to peace. Many commentators seemed to have missed the point that the accords, without being significantly expanded through negotiation and trust-building, were insufficient for even the most basic development of Palestinian life. Such development requires enough contiguous territory to build a viable state, and a capital in Jerusalem which allows cultural, religious and intellectual centers of Palestinian life to coalesce and flourish. Even Lerner and the Jewish renewal movement initially missed this crucial point as they argued heatedly for unequivocal support for the Oslo process.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Baruch Goldstein's mass murder of Palestinians in Hebron, Benjamin Netanyahu's years as prime minister and now the equivocation of Ehud Barak and his threatened formation of a national unity government with Ariel Sharon—all this would seem to have sealed the fate of the Oslo process. During that process, Israeli settlements have grown in number and density and the borders of Israel have solidified and expanded. There is even talk of Netanyahu's returning to political life. But rhetoric aside, is there a significant difference between the former and the present prime minister? Under both prime ministers, Israeli settlements expanded. Under both, land continued to be confiscated. Under both, real sovereignty was denied to Palestinians.

In what appears to be our post-Oslo circumstances, do Jews have—any more than during the *intifada*—a responsibility to defend Israeli policies and borders as Israel defines them? Should Jews who are critical of Israeli policies join ranks with the

government, even if its policies deny Palestinians their rights to self-defense and to struggle for freedom? Are Jewish dissenters sadly tragic figures, lacking a positive self-identification, “unabashedly pro-Palestinian,” as a rabbi in Texas termed it in her e-mail missive to rabbis of the Conservative movement? In her view, “slanted news coverage is trouble enough, but to have so much of this driven by Jews, who are either in the media or get media attention, is tragic.”

Over the past decades a reversal has taken place in Jewish history; the victims have become victors and we as a people have changed. This change is most obvious in our extended military campaign to form a state and expand it at the expense of Palestinians. The less obvious and more insidious change has come in the unequivocal support of Israel that is demanded of all Jews. The Jewish intellectual and religious tradition has become twisted to defend policies that further the dislocation of persons and communities, deny the most basic values of human dignity and citizenship, and argue for that denial under the cloak of innocence and redemption.

Jews who argue openly for the freedom of Palestinians, over whom Israel has military and territorial power, are branded as self-haters and traitors. Such pressure to conform to an uncritically pro-Israel position spells the demise of a value-oriented and ethically concerned tradition. Is the call for unity under these conditions a realistic option, one that comports with Jewish values and creates a future worth bequeathing to our children?

What are Jews to do in this situation? Can we still argue for a sharing of the land that would give Jews and Palestinians dignity, equality and justice? Does the argument for Palestinian rights, for example, intend the real sharing of all of Jerusalem, east and west, old and new, economically, politically, intellectually and spiritually, or is this, at its heart, anti-Jewish? The actual sharing of Jerusalem, as a broken middle of two struggling peoples, could be a catalyst for healing, justice and reconciliation. Sharing Jerusalem only in a symbolic way, the offer made by Barak to Arafat at the Camp David summit this summer, portends escalation of the conflict toward what indeed seems already to be an undeclared war.

In times of trouble, troublemakers abound, and throughout history Jews have produced many. The prophets come to mind—Aaron and Moses, Jeremiah and Isaiah, along with many others then and now. Perhaps that ongoing lineage is about to end in the defense of the indefensible and in the strategies, both national and local, to

denounce through character assassination those who witness for an alternative way forward. If the forces of conformity and contrived unity in the Jewish world succeed in quieting the troublemakers, the way forward may seem dim, for isn't the "troublemaker" one who sees an alternative?

When a claim for rights is made for "us" but not for "them," a hypocrisy surfaces that eats away at the tradition until the foundation disappears. Then the argument for justice is seen as ridiculous and troublesome, constituting betrayal.

And what of rabbinic leadership, whose appointed task is to apply the wisdom of the ages to contemporary circumstances? As one Jewish scholar commented wryly, rabbis seem more concerned with vendettas than with ethics. Is it any wonder that so few Jews associate with the Jewish community? Most Jews who protest injustice are in exile, looking for a spirituality and a leadership that is wanting in their birth community. Most Jews who protest injustice, including Israeli Jews, have no use for religion or at least for the religion practiced by the rabbis who in their silence are complicit. Perhaps we need to develop another sense of the rabbi, one traveling with Jews of conscience into exile. Is this where the Jewish covenant is to be found today, in exile, witnessing the decline of Jewish ethics?

How long it takes to destroy a tradition that has evolved over the millennia may seem a theoretical question. What can be said with some certainty is that those who commit injustice and those who are blind to it are joined in a torturous world of assertion and denial. In the Jewish world, the tragedy lies here. That is why the call for peace with justice falls on deaf ears.

Still the witness remains. Noam Kuzar, an Israeli soldier, has refused to take part in repressing the latest Palestinian uprising. In an open letter to friends and colleagues, Kuzar's parents write: "Our son, Noam Kuzar, a conscript in the Israel Defense Force, was sentenced today to 28 days in military prison for refusing to participate in current IDF operations to repress the protest activity of Palestinians. When his unit was informed of a change in current training plans so as to reinforce IDF troops engaged in putting down the Palestinian revolt, Noam told his commanding officers yesterday that he could not in good conscience participate in such actions. He simply refused to get on the bus."

In response to this kind of moral witness, Lerner writes: "We want the world to know that in this dark period there were Jews who stood up and proclaimed their

commitment to a Judaism that would fight for a world in which every human being is treated with the respect and the sense of sanctity that are central to a spiritual vision of the world.”

In the next weeks and months that witness will be tried starkly as the vision of an exploding Middle East rises again. May God give us the strength to testify to a fidelity that is inclusive of Jews and Palestinians, even and especially as the unity that is called for seeks to silence those who protest in the name of justice.