

# Still Immoral, Still Stupid

## Let's End 50 Years of Israel's Occupation of the West Bank — One Person/One Vote

BY RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

**F**AMILY RELATIONSHIPS can be very complicated. One can be extremely angry at a parent, a sibling, even one's own child, deeply disapprove of some of their actions, and yet still love them quite deeply. That is the situation facing many Jews in the Israeli Left and increasing numbers of American Jews who are united around the following demands of the government of Israel:

- End the Occupation and end the daily violence against Palestinians that is an intrinsic part of almost every attempt by one nation to dominate another by force.
- Acknowledge Israel's role in creating the Palestinian refugee problem (not 100 percent Israel's fault, but definitely a large part Israel's fault).
- Stop calling Israel a "democracy" when it rules over two million Palestinians and does not give them the right to vote in Israeli elections or otherwise participate in shaping the decisions that impact their lives.
- Stop the building of illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land and stop the displacement of any more Palestinians. Accept the validity of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 which "reaffirms that the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-state solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace." As *Tikkun's* contributing editor Mark LeVine pointed out, this resolution reminds Israel's government and its American apologists that its half-century policy of creating "facts on the ground" as a way to normalize the Occupation and the settlement enterprise it has always been intended to support, has been for nothing, no matter how much Palestinian land Israel claims to have annexed.
- Stop the legal assaults on the rights of Jewish and Palestinian-Israeli poets, writers, artists, and human rights activists who are doing nothing but speaking out or protesting the Occupation. And along those same lines, apply the same standard of law to both Israelis and Palestinians both in the territories and throughout the rest of the country.

Many Jews feel a special connection to the land of Israel, and we care about Israelis, worry about their survival, and have compassion for them, even while detesting the violent actions of some of them, the arrogance of many of their leaders, the seeming obliviousness of many of them to what they are doing to the Palestinian people and their willingness to tolerate a government that promotes hatred toward Palestinians—a government that slowly but systematically steals Palestinian lands and ignores human rights while simultaneously aligning itself with the most reactionary, sexist, and intolerance-promoting elements of the Jewish religious establishment. That establishment imposes its practices on the secular Israeli majority as the price for its willingness to give a green light to repressive policies of the government—along the way turning many Israelis into intolerant secularists who blame all the country's problems on religious Jews.

Many of us also feel a family tie to our cousins the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim Palestinians, spiritual descendents of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, and have compassion for them, and are outraged at how they are being treated by Israel, even as we consistently critique the violent actions of Hamas and the anti-Semitism that persists in parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

We also are concerned that the policies of the Israeli government, by calling itself "the State of the Jewish people," and the largely blind support it has received from many of the major institutions of the Jewish community, have besmirched the reputation of Jews as a people concerned with ethics and justice.

We see increasing evidence that Israel's policies are turning younger Jews against not only Israel, but against Judaism. One can enter almost any synagogue in America—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or even the highly spiritual Jewish Renewal movement—and be welcomed even if one doesn't believe in God, doesn't want to follow the Jewish traditions, or even has no particular interest in studying the Jewish holy texts. But if one announces one's opposition to the policies of the State of Israel and/or support for the human rights of the Palestinian people, one is



Palestinian women crossing through the Qalandiya checkpoint (run by the Israeli military) between Jerusalem and Ramallah for prayer at the Al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan in June 2016. Men over 45 and women were allowed to cross through without permits.

treated as a heretic and often given the clear message they are not welcome and their views are outside the range of acceptable discourse. De facto, Israel has become the god of many Jews, and the Israeli army has become that god's emissary on earth—the one thing that they fully trust. In their mostly blind worship of the State of Israel, large swaths of the Jewish people are massively abandoning the values that the Jewish tradition urged us to embody—loving kindness, justice, peace, mercy, compassion, slowness to anger, forgiving iniquity, and transgressions—in the one place in the world where Jews have the power to actually implement these values in an entire nation state. Thousands of years from now, if the human race survives the current destruction of our environment, Jews will look back with deep shame at how the Jewish people let our tradition be so polluted by support for Israel's inhumanity toward the Palestinians for the past fifty years, and continuing now.

But even here, some compassion is needed for our people. For many Jews, God's failure to "show up" and save the Jews from the Holocaust, and the refusal of most nations of the world to open their gates to Jews seeking refuge, led to disillusionment about the possibility of a world based on love and justice. Thus the hard-nosed neoconservatives and their recycling of the ancient and perverted view that "might makes right" in international politics.

The utopian and socialist branches of the Zionist movement quickly faded as more and more Jews came to believe that the only thing they can really count on is the power of the Israeli army and the potential sanctuary they might find in Israel should future upsurges of anti-Semitism (beginning to show its ugly face once again around the world in the past ten years, and more recently in the U.S. responding to the legitimization of hatred and demeaning of others during the 2016 election period by Donald Trump) threaten Jewish safety once again. Unable to shake the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that infected not only the survivors but also the millions of Jews whose families or friends were wiped out in this genocidal attempt to murder all Jews on the planet, the previously marginal right wing Zionism of Herut (now Likud) became the predominant "common sense of the Jewish people," even infecting those who still hold on to a belief in God yet put more trust in military strength than in the power of love and generosity.

So modern Orthodox and other observant Jews utter prayers in their synagogues for the State of Israel and for its army, claiming it to be "the beginning of the flourishing of our redemption," while downplaying the pressing social justice messages of the Torah and the prophets and their relevance to the realities of contemporary politics both in the Middle East and in the U.S. Most notably ignored:



Israeli soldiers try and push back demonstrators during a protest against the Occupation in the village of Nabi Saleh in the West Bank, in December 2013.

the frequent repetition of Torah commandments to “love the stranger/the Other” (ha’ger) and to not do to them what was done to us when we were “strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Indeed, many Jews of this sort who claim to believe in God nevertheless hold the view that we can’t trust others, that the “other” always wants to hurt us, and that the only thing to count on is force and violence. This way of thinking, as I demonstrate in my book *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*, is precisely the view that Judaism came into the world to challenge. Those who trust only in power are following the path of Pharaoh, of Sodom, of the Roman Caesars, of Hitler and Stalin, of Nixon and of Kissinger, of the neocons, and now of Trump. It’s the antithesis of Judaism, but it is to some extent the logic of global capitalism, imperialism, and domination. Yet I’ve heard it echoed in many synagogues by rabbis and others who are liberal on every other topic, but revert to this kind of thinking when it comes to discussing making peace with the Palestinian people and allowing them the same freedom we celebrate for ourselves at Passover each year.

Yet it is hard for any of us who understand the traumas faced by the Jewish people, and recognize how brutally we have been treated by much of the world for much of the past two thousand years, to approach this issue without some

compassion. That compassion must extend to the people of Israel whose very existence as a country has always been challenged by all the states surrounding it, states that were meanwhile brutalizing their own minorities and sometimes their majorities as well! Think Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and today even Turkey!

This complex of feelings mirrors that of many progressives in the U.S. toward our own country. We know that the U.S. has been one of the most violent and destructive countries in the world in the past sixty years. We understand its horrendous imperialist policies have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Iraq, and the countries of South and Central America. Building on the criminal legacy of previous European colonialists, the U.S. has perpetuated and exacerbated the impoverishment of millions through its imposed trade agreements and unequivocal support for a global economic system that leaves 2.5 billion people living on less than \$2 a day and 1.5 billion living on less than \$1 a day. The UN estimates between 6,000-10,000 children under the age of five die every single day around the world because of curable diseases linked to malnutrition that the U.S. could end were that our priority (see our Global and Domestic Marshall Plan at [www.tikkun.org/gmp](http://www.tikkun.org/gmp) for details).

We know that we live in a country in which over 2,000,000

people are imprisoned, African Americans are often unsure whether they will be arbitrarily arrested or even physically assaulted (in many cases murdered) by racist police, Native Americans' rights are similarly violated on a daily basis (our treaty arrangements with them ignored and their land violated in dozens of ways, most recently at Standing Rock in North Dakota), and millions of undocumented workers live in constant fear of arrest and deportation to countries they escaped in order to avoid being killed, raped, imprisoned, or simply returned to the ranks of those slowly dying of malnutrition (repressive policies dramatically escalated by the Obama Administration and we fear worse from the Trump presidency).

We know that we live in a country where haters and overt racists can win elected offices and where sexists and homophobes continue to degrade women and LGBTQ people. We at *Tikkun* have embraced much of the platform of the Movement for Black Lives because it so effectively nails the racism in this country and provides powerful counter-measures (even while taking exception to their description of Israel as engaged in genocide).

And yet, many of us, while using our political energies to nonviolently struggle to change this system, nevertheless love the U.S. and the American people, appreciate the complexities of their lives which have led some to respond to their class oppression by joining hateful movements, and others to endorse militarism out of fear that they and their families may someday become targets of radical extremists and terrorists. These people have much pain in their lives, and the response of *Tikkun* is not to disparage them, but to help them see that there are other paths to dealing with and relieving that pain besides demeaning others.

There are very few of us on the American Left who call for the United States to be dismantled for its crimes, though they far exceed those of Israel, as do the crimes of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria and so many other countries. No wonder, then, that we can understand Israelis whose fears are leading them in destructive directions, particularly when they hear about people calling for the actual dismantling of Israel. Just as we can love our fellow citizens in this country, we can love people in Israel and in Palestine even as we disagree with the paths they have chosen to deal with past pains and current fears, and even as we are outraged at the continuing oppression and racism against Palestinians.

So, yes, we have complex feelings about Israel. In my book *Embracing Israel/Palestine: A Path to Middle East Peace* I try to tell the story of the past 140 years of this struggle in a nuanced way, demonstrating that both sides of this struggle have legitimate claims, and both have been inordinately insensitive to the needs of the other side. In each case, the partisans of one side have focused on the extreme haters on the other side and used their actions to justify acts of violence or

oppression that have incensed the citizens of the other side and made each people more likely to embrace their most extreme elements. Order it at [www.tikkun.org/eip](http://www.tikkun.org/eip).

But seeing this as a situation caused by the ethical failures and psychological blindness of many people on each side of the struggle does not lead us at *Tikkun* to conclude that there is nothing to do to heal the situation. The reality of 2017 (and this has been the reality for a good part of the past fifty years) is that Israel has vastly more economic, political, and military power than the Palestinian people and hence has the greater responsibility to solve the problem.

The first step would be to end the Occupation, and in a generous spirit and honoring the Torah's command "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue/chase after," create a Palestinian state.

Yet the political reality at the present moment makes that highly unlikely no matter which major political party in Israel would win the next election. Though we've been strong advocates for a two-state solution for the past thirty years, and still believe that to be the best achievable path for the next thirty years until our more visionary plan—the no state solution, which includes the transformation of the global political reality from a nation-state configuration to an environmental district configuration—becomes obtainable. Given the reality on the ground, I now believe that the best way to reach a two state solution is to advocate for a short-term solution: inclusion of all of the Palestinian people inside the West Bank and Gaza in the democratic processes of those who rule over them. Simply put: "one person, one vote."

## One Person, One Vote

We need to build on the movement for One Person/One Vote in Israel/Palestine (including the West Bank and Gaza). If Israel is not prepared to end the blockade of Gaza and help Palestinians create an economically and politically viable state of their own, then it must give all Palestinians a vote in the Knesset elections, since de facto all Palestinians are living under the control of the Israeli state.

The demand for One Person/One Vote brings attention to the central problem that most Americans have to face: that although we claim to be for democracy, we are supporting the denial of democracy for the Palestinian people. This is nothing new. America's hypocrisy about democracy has been revealed over and over again: The counting of African Americans as 3/5 of a human being in order to give slave states more representation in the Congress, denying felons who have served their time the right to vote, blocking a direct democratic election of president by creating an electoral college which gives disproportionate power to small population states. But it is also true that tens of millions of Americans used democratic processes and mobilized to support the Civil Rights Movement, oppose the war in Vietnam, the suppression of liberation movements in South and Central America, and U.S. support for apartheid in South Africa.



An Israeli soldier points his gun at protestors during a demonstration against the Occupation and separation wall in Al Walaja in the West Bank in September 2007.

One Person/One Vote has a strong resonance in the U.S., the West, and even among many Israelis who have long believed that their strength and support in the world comes from being “the one democracy in the Middle East.” This strategy confronts that false belief, challenges the U.S. and the West to support their own commitments to democracy, and opens the door to speaking to the American majority whose loyalty to Israel is based more on guilt at what the world had done to the Jews than on any serious thought about what the Palestinian people deserve. The guilt is appropriate, but the response of giving Israel blind support is not.

The One Person/One Vote strategy must differentiate itself from those calling for an end to the State of Israel and the creation of a secular state with no particular allegiance to the Jewish people. After two thousand years of oppression, most Jews will not accept the elimination of the only state in the world that has a commitment to provide safety for the Jewish people. Hence, there would have to be a voting requirement for those invited to participate in the elections of this state or to serve in its Knesset: that they sign an agreement that until all anti-Semitism has been eliminated in the world, the State of Israel will continue to give priority to Jews seeking to move to Israel who can demonstrate a well-founded belief that they are in danger because of their Jewishness in the country where they currently hold citizenship (just as the laws governing immigration to the U.S.). As I argued in

*Embracing Israel/Palestine*, when Palestine comes into existence as a separate state, something I still hope for, I’ll be advocating for it to have this same kind of affirmative action for Palestinians around the world who can demonstrate a well-founded belief that they are in danger because they are Palestinians, or Muslims.

Meanwhile, once this newly democratized Israel is created, Palestinians will be able to use their democratic rights to create full equality for all its Palestinian citizens as well as for anyone else to whom the State of Israel has offered asylum or has brought in to work in Israel. They should have the right to give equal public recognition to the holidays and religious observances of all of Israel’s different populations, not only to the Jewish ones.

In such a state, Israel’s observance of the Sabbath can have equal status with Christian observance of Sunday and Muslim observance of Friday as their “weekend,” and Hebrew should have the same status of being one of the two official languages of the state along with Arabic. In this way, we differentiate what part of Israel as “the Jewish state” is legitimate and needs to be preserved (its guarantor as a safe homeland for Jews from around the world) and what part should be subject to democratic negotiation (the integration of Arab culture and practices into the fabric of Israeli education, and the separation of synagogue and mosque from the State). Of course, once established, leaders of a democratized Israel will

have to address how to handle the many questions of citizenship, Palestinian refugees, immigration, reparations and the like.

The One Person/One Vote strategy will only catch on if its supporters champion a democratic ethos that many Americans hold, but have not yet applied when thinking about Israel and Palestine. If this “one person/one vote” movement grows, and simultaneously and unambiguously affirms Israel’s right to exist and provide a guaranteed homeland and place of refuge for Jews, but only as a democratic state, its power will move many Israelis back to the peace camp.

Indeed, such a movement would be the very thing that might push Israeli right-wingers to believe that the one way they can stop this kind of a call for democracy is to engage for the first time since the Oslo Accords in a genuine negotiation with Palestinians about how to create an economically and politically viable Palestinian state and how to deal with Palestinian refugees. I suggest that in such a negotiation for two states that Israel accept 20,000 Palestinian refugees into the pre-67 boundaries of Israel every year for the next thirty, a number small enough to not upset the demographic balance, but large enough to be seen as a genuine move toward peace, particularly if accompanied, as it must, by the other countries of the world who have a stake in Middle East Peace funding reparations for the Palestinian people as well as reparations for Jews forced to flee Arab states from 1945-1960. I also suggest that a viable peace deal, sponsored by the Israeli right-wing as a way of escaping the global pressures that a “one person/one vote” movement would likely spur, would allow West Bank Israelis to continue to live in their settlements, but only after accepting Palestinian citizenship, agreeing to live by the laws and court decisions of the Palestinian state, disarmed, and giving up their Israeli citizenship. Israel would agree to never intervene on behalf of these newly minted Jewish Palestinians in the court decisions of the Palestinian state. As Orthodox rabbi and West Bank settler Menachem Fruman (z”l) told his followers, the Torah command and right of the Jews to live in any part of the holy land (Eretz Yisrael), preserved in the approach I suggest here, did not entail the right to live in a Jewish state, but did obligate Jews to love their fellow human beings (the geyreem/or Other) as themselves.

If millions of Americans rallied around this demand for One Person/One Vote for Israel and Palestine, and if they supported candidates for public office who held that same position, it could within the next sixteen years change a great deal in U.S. politics and in Israel. Ironically, it may well be the most realistic strategy to achieve an Israeli majority for a generous two state solution along the lines suggested in the previous paragraph!

While pushing for this inside the U.S., an intelligent peace movement would also work to create an “empathy tribe” of thousands of peace oriented people from around the world

who would go to Palestine, Israel, and to Jewish communities in the U.S. and other major populations of Diaspora Jewry with the aim of helping the Israeli people and world Jewry heal from their PTSD and develop empathy for the suffering that their country’s policies have inflicted on the “others.”

*Tikkun* has long advocated that what would make such changes possible could come from the U.S. and the West abandoning its belief that “homeland security” can best be achieved through domination (military, economic, political, cultural and diplomatic). Instead we should all be adopting the Strategy of Generosity, manifested in part in the *Tikkun* version of the GMP—a Global and Domestic Marshall Plan with the advanced industrial countries of the world donating 1-2% of our Gross Domestic Product each year for the next twenty—sufficient to end, not just ameliorate, global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, inadequate health care, and repairing the damage 150 years of irresponsible forms of industrialization has done to the life support system of our environment. It’s not just the money that would be important, but the new way of thinking that is crucial—thinking that caring for others is the path to security because it will eventually elicit from others that same caring.

We are not suggesting that the most extreme haters and terrorists will suddenly become transformed through this approach, but rather that their ability to recruit support from the rest of their communities will dramatically decrease.

If a Bernie Sanders-type candidacy for president in the 2020 presidential elections went beyond the stale economic rhetoric that failed to win Bernie the Democratic nomination in 2016, and adopted a heart-centered spiritual progressive politics, s/he might not only dramatically bring back sanity to American politics but also create a strong American incentive to push Israel toward either a single democratic society or a two-state solution based on generosity and empathy for both sides of the struggle.

This could in turn create an Israeli majority ready to not only free the Palestinian people but also create a movement in Israel that was its first genuinely Jewish political movement—namely one that actually believed in a world of love and justice and had the backbone to say that it was these values that were the only authentic ones for a Jewish state. Such a movement, advocating generosity in providing reparations to the Palestinian refugees and support for creating an economically and politically viable Palestinian state living in peace with Israel, and eventually becoming its strongest ally, would be more rational, realistic and sustainable than the movement that now seeks to perpetuate the Occupation for another fifty years or longer!

No strategy that seeks to coerce Israel to end the Occupation and create a Palestinian state has a chance at this historical moment. According to a Pew Research Center poll in May of 2016, “Far more Americans continue to sympathize more with Israel (54%) than with the Palestinians (19%) in

the Middle East dispute.” If those of us who want to free Palestine from Israel’s domination focus on what tactic to use to coerce Israel to change while we don’t have close to a majority of Americans believing that Palestinians are basically right in their cause, we are unlikely to be successful though we may get lots of attention. But attention is not our goal—reconciliation between Israel and Palestine and lasting peace is our goal.

And let’s stick to the actual facts. Rather than using inflammatory words like “apartheid” and “genocide,” as some of the authors in this issue of *Tikkun* magazine are doing, we will be far more effective if we simply describe the conditions under which Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are living. Those facts are powerful enough to help people see why the Occupation needs to end. Once we get into these more global claims, we end up giving those who wish to discount the oppression Palestinians face daily a way to switch the topic to whether this is “really” apartheid or genocide. Not a smart strategy when facing an American population that has just elected in November 2016 Republicans and Democrats who seem nearly totally united in defense of Israel’s policies. Let’s be smart if we want to actually win a change in consciousness in the American people. The same diversion happens when peace-oriented progressives try to organize people around specific strategies to coerce Israel to change its policies—the conversation switches to the legitimacy of the coercions being proposed, and away from the outrage people might feel if the focus was on educating them to what is the daily experience of living under Israeli occupation!

Far more plausible is the strategy proposed here: focus not on the tactics of political and economic coercion, but on changing the American public’s view of the fundamental legitimacy of the Palestinian’s cause for equal rights with Israelis. That could happen if the peace movements here, in Israel and in Palestine endorse the version of the “One Person, One Vote” strategy proposed here by *Tikkun*. And this will only happen if all of us unite and launch a multi-year education campaign similar to that of the Civil Rights Movement and the teach-ins that energized the movement against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. With sufficient sensitivity, empathy and generosity of spirit, we could accomplish a powerful change of consciousness!

This is the real challenge—not headline grabbing, but the day-to-day, neighborhood and community group organizing around a vision of the world we want, not just what we are against. We at *Tikkun* and the Network of Spiritual Progressives can play our part, but this will take the participation and support of all those who really want to achieve the kind of liberation from Occupation that will benefit the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Jews, and all others on this planet.

In this issue of *Tikkun* we invited a broad swath of people, including many who disagree with us to our left and to our right, to comment on what the Occupation has meant to

them and/or their ideas about how to end it. For space reasons, or because some of those writers didn’t meet the deadline for our print version of *Tikkun*, some of those articles will appear only on our website, but most are printed here. If you appreciate *Tikkun* being this kind of forum in which you can hear ideas openly debated, trusting our readers to make up their own minds rather than just presenting our own perspective, help keep us alive. We count on your tax-deductible donations to keep *Tikkun* going. If you appreciate what we do, stretch beyond what you would normally give to a cause you believe in, make yourself a bit uncomfortable, but help keep this important voice alive! [www.tikkun.org/donate](http://www.tikkun.org/donate) or send a donation by check to *Tikkun*, 2342 Shattuck Ave #1200, Berkeley, Ca. 94704.

And may peace, justice, security and well-being come to Israel, to the Palestinian people, and to all people on this planet, speedily and in our own day! ■

—Rabbi Michael Lerner, written in December 2016 for our 50th anniversary of the Occupation issue Spring 2017.  
[RabbiLerner.Tikkun@gmail.com](mailto:RabbiLerner.Tikkun@gmail.com)



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