

What It Means to Open Our Hearts to The Other

By [Michael Lerner*](#)

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The absolute prerequisite for making peace is for Israelis and Palestinians to be open their hearts to each other with an attitude of generosity and caring. No political arrangements will ever be sufficient to generate that — it will take a social/spiritual transformation that should be the focus of Jewish Renewal in Israel.

The first step in this process is for Israelis and Palestinians to learn and be able to sympathetically tell the story of this struggle as perceived by the other side.

For the Palestinians that is going to have to include the following elements:

- a. ability to recount the suffering of the Jewish people not only in Christian countries but our suffering in Islamic countries as well;
- b. ability to recount the struggle of Jews to leave Europe in the 1930s and 1940 and the role of Palestinian leadership in closing the doors of immigration — even after the facts of the Holocaust were well known;
- c. ability to recount the fears that anyone would develop when faced with the kind of indiscriminate terrorism that has been aimed against the Israeli population;
- d. ability to identify elements of anti-Semitism in the stories being taught about Jews and Israelis in Palestinian and Arab texts and newspapers

For Israelis the story is going to have to include the following elements:

- a. ability to recount the experience of Palestinians who had lived in peace with Jews for hundreds of years when faced with the emergence of a form of European Jewish nationalism which asserted that they were going to create a Jewish state in some country they had never even visited and on the land of people whom they had never consulted.
- b. ability to recount what it must have felt like to Palestinians to have Britain's Balfour Declaration call for such a Jewish state under their colonial regime, and what it felt like in the 1920s before the rise of fascism in Europe when leftists in the Zionist movement were marginalized and the more nationalist elements in the Labor Party took the decisive step of creating a "no Arab need apply" Jewish-only labor movement, the Histadrut, which set up the economic infrastructure of the emerging Israel as a Jews-only reality.
- c. ability to recount what it must have felt like when Arab peasants who never elected their so-called leaders were suddenly told by those leaders that the Zionists were determined to drive them off their land — and then that actually began to happen. Or what it felt like when using the excuse of defending their interests, neighboring Arab regimes sent in paltry armies, claimed they were doing so in the interests of the Palestinian people, and then annexed the West Bank to Jordan? Or what it felt like when the right-wing Jewish terrorists entered the village of Deir Yassin and murdered 350 men women and children in early 1948-and threatened to do the same to any

Palestinians who stayed? Or what it felt like when Yitzhak Rabin entered Ramle in

June of 1948 and ordered the immediate evacuation of over 50,000 people, hundreds of whom died on the forced march out of the new State carrying only what they could on their backs? Or what it felt like after armistices had been signed and later peace agreements with both Jordan and Egypt and still the Israeli authorities would not let any of the original 600,000 civilians who fled to return to their homes — and made it an matter of principle that there would be no "right of return" though that is guaranteed in international law?

d. ability to recount what it felt like to grow up in a refugee camp and be accused of being a terrorist because a handful of people in your camp had been recruited to an Islamic terrorist organization which you didn't personally support.

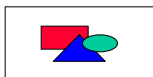
e. ability to recount what it felt like to then be told that there would be peace coming and the creation of a Palestinian state in the 22% of the original Palestine that was now the West Bank and Gaza; rejoicing in the Oslo accord, and then finding that by the time Barak met with Arafat at Camp David in 2000 that instead of Israelis gradually withdrawing during the intervening years they had increased their settlers from 120,000 to 200,000? And that they now demanded to keep settlers in place with roads crisscrossing the Palestinian state they offered, military checkpoints throughout this new country with all the potential for harrassment that you had already experienced day after day?

f. ability to recount what it would feel like to have your own national liberation struggle against the Occupation described as nothing but terrorism? And have your children killed at 5 times the rate that Israelis were suffering casualties, have your country occupied, have settlers running through your villages destroying property and randomly shooting people, and then watch as the international media reported on the deaths and funerals of Israeli victims of terror but rarely reported or made anything of the daily acts of violence your people were experiencing?

So if we can learn to tell this story, we who are the more powerful could set the example for the less powerful — and in so doing reconnect with what it means in Torah when it tells us categorically "Thou shalt love the stranger."

This is the work of Jewish Renewal. Now ask yourself how many people in your own Jewish Renewal community can open their hearts and tell the story this way? Or is our open-heartedness still just for each other in our small community but not for "the Other"?

*Rabbi Michael Lerner received smicha from Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi and two other Jewish Renewal rabbis — all with their original smicha from Orthodox communities. He is the editor of Tikkun magazine, author of the books Jewish Renewal and Spirit Matters, and rabbi of Beyt Tikkun synagogue in San Francisco.



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