
Where Does the Violence Come From?

BY RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

The people who did this attack [on Sept. 11] are a real threat to the human race. The perpetrators deserve to be punished, and I personally would be happy if all the people involved in this act were to be imprisoned for the rest of their lives. But that is quite different from talk about “eliminating countries” which we heard from Colin Powell in the days after the attack.

The narrow focus on the perpetrators allows us to avoid dealing with the underlying issues. When violence becomes so prevalent throughout the planet, it’s too easy to simply talk of “deranged minds.” We need to ask ourselves, “What is it in the way that we are living, organizing our societies, and treating each other that makes violence seem plausible to so many people?” And why is it that our immediate response to violence is to use violence ourselves—thus reinforcing the cycle of violence in the world?

We in the spiritual world will see the root problem here as a growing global incapacity to recognize the spirit of God in each other—what we call the sanctity of each human being. But even if you reject religious language, you can see that the willingness of people to hurt each other to advance their own interests has become a global problem, and it’s only the dramatic level of this particular attack which distinguishes it from the violence and insensitivity to each other that is part of our daily lives.

We live in one world, increasingly interconnected with everyone, and the forces that lead people to feel outrage, anger and desperation eventually impact on our own daily lives.

If the U.S. turns its back on global agreements to preserve the environment, unilaterally cancels its treaties to not build a missile defense, accelerates the processes by which a global economy has made some people in the third world richer but many poorer, shows that it cares nothing for the fate of refugees who have

been homeless for decades, and otherwise turns its back on ethical norms, it becomes far easier for the haters and the fundamentalists to recruit people who are willing to kill themselves in strikes against what they perceive to be an evil American empire represented by the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Most Americans will feel puzzled by any reference to this “larger picture.” It seems baffling to imagine that somehow we are part of a world system which is slowly destroying the life support system of the planet, and quickly transferring the wealth of the world into our own pockets.

We don’t feel personally responsible when an American corporation runs a sweatshop in the Philippines or crushes efforts of workers to organize in Singapore. We don’t see ourselves implicated when the U.S. refuses to consider the plight of Palestinian refugees or uses the excuse of fighting drugs to support repression in Colombia or other parts of Central America. We don’t even see the symbolism when terrorists attack America’s military center and our trade center—we talk of them as buildings, though others see them as centers of the forces that are causing the world so much pain.

We have narrowed our own attention to “getting through” or “doing well” in our own personal lives, and who has time to focus on all the rest of this? Most of us are leading perfectly reasonable lives within the options that we have available to us—so why should others be angry at us, much less strike out against us? And the truth is, our anger is also understandable.

Yet our acts of counter-terror will be counter-productive. We should have learned from the current phase of the Israel:Palestinian struggle; responding to terror with more violence, rather than asking ourselves what we could do to change the conditions that generated it in the first place, will only ensure more violence against us in the future.

This is a world out of touch with itself, filled with people who have forgotten how

to recognize and respond to the sacred in each other because we are so used to looking at others from the standpoint of what they can do for us. The alternatives are stark: either start caring about the fate of everyone on this planet or be prepared for a slippery slope toward violence that will eventually dominate our daily lives.

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The above is condensed from an essay in TIKKUN magazine, a journal of Jewish politics and culture. Reprinted with permission. To subscribe to TIKKUN magazine, and for the text of the complete essay, go to www.tikkun.org

Teaching Ideas

Michael Lerner says that “We need to ask ourselves, ‘What is it in the way that we are living, organizing our societies, and treating each other that makes violence seem plausible to so many people?’ What is his answer to that question? What is your answer?”

Compare the changes that Roy, Lerner, and Martin Luther King (p.24) would like to see in our society.

Lerner writes that “We have narrowed our own attention to ‘getting through’ or ‘doing well’ in our own personal lives, and who has time to focus on all the rest of this? Most of us are leading perfectly reasonable lives within the options that we have available to us — so why should others be angry at us...?” Answer that question: Should the world be angry at ordinary Americans who are minding their own business and “doing well”?

Assign each of these three readings — from Roy, Lerner, and King — to separate groups of students. Have them come together representing each of these perspectives to propose an answer to the question: What should the United States do to eliminate the roots of terrorism?