At-One-Ment: In Conversation with Rabbi Michael Lerner
by Leslee Goodman

Michael Lerner has been synthesizing his spiritual and social justice yearnings since adolescence, when he found a mentor and guide in Abraham Joshua Heschel, of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Lerner began his own legacy of political activism in 1964 when, as a student at UC Berkeley pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy, he served on the Executive Committee of the Free Speech Movement, advocating for civil rights and an end to the war in Vietnam. Eventually, however, the shortcomings of the activist movements of the ’60s and ’70s inspired him to earn a second Ph.D., in psychology, from the Wright Institute, to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations underlying American society. He then founded the Institute for Labor and Mental Health and became principal investigator of a major National Institutes for Mental Health (NIMH) research project on work stress and family life. It was that research that led him to identify a spiritual crisis in American society.

“This focus on money and power may do wonders in the marketplace,” he wrote, “but it creates a tremendous crisis in our society. People who have spent all day learning how to sell themselves and to manipulate others are in no position to form lasting friendships or intimate relationships... Many Americans hunger for a different kind of society—one based on principles of caring, ethical and spiritual sensitivity, and communal solidarity. Their need for meaning is just as intense as their need for economic security.”

In 1986, with his then wife, Nan Fink, he founded Tikkun magazine. The name means “to heal, repair, and transform” the world. Among his intentions in founding the magazine was to challenge progressives for their inability to understand the centrality of spiritual concerns in the lives of ordinary Americans. With associate editor Peter Gabel, Tikkun began articulating a “politics of meaning,” which exhorts progressive movements to address spiritual concerns to win consistent majority support in the political arena. In 2005, Lerner expanded his efforts to develop a “politics of meaning” with the creation of the Network for Spiritual Progressives, an international interfaith and secular humanist-welcoming community of people dedicated to building a New Bottom Line, which he articulates here.

After 20 years of study, including three years as a student at Jewish Theological Seminary, Lerner received rabbinical ordination in 1995. He then created Beyt Tikkun Synagogue-Without-Walls, which meets in Berkeley California.

In addition to his work to “heal, repair, and transform” politics in the U.S., Lerner has sparked criticism, as well as support, for his willingness to publicly criticize Israel with regard to its treatment of Palestinians. He opposes Israeli occupation of the West Bank and supports the adoption of the Geneva Accords as a basis for an independent Palestinian state.
Lerner is the author of many books, including The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism (1994), Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation(1994), which was a national bestseller; Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin (with Dr. Cornel West) (1995), Spirit Matters (2000), Healing Israel/Palestine: A Path to Peace and Reconciliation(2003), The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right (2005), which also was a national bestseller, Embracing Israel/Palestine: A Strategy to Heal and Transform the Middle East (2011), and Revolutionary Love: a Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World, forthcoming in October 2019 from University of California Press.

Dr. West, professor of African American Studies at Harvard University, author of Race Matters, and Lerner’s co-author for Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin, wrote: “Lerner is one of the most significant prophetic public intellectuals and spiritual leaders of our generation. Secular intellectuals and those who yearn for a major change in the direction of American society can learn a lot from reading his books.”

Rabbi Lerner spoke with me at length by phone from his home in the Bay Area. – Leslee Goodman

The MOON: How do you define atonement, and why is it necessary?

Lerner: I define atonement as “at-one-ment,” which means getting back to the unity of well-being that comes from recognizing ourselves as part of the God energy of the universe. In that process, we come into our highest self through a process of self-examination to see where we have gone astray and missed the mark, falling short of embodying the highest values of the God energy of the universe. Human beings are created in the image of God and have the capacity to reflect that in our daily life. The process of atonement leads us to look carefully at where we have missed the mark of our divine inheritance and are no longer embodying in our daily life the highest values of the God energy of the universe.

The MOON: Is atonement only something between you and God, or is it also between you and others?

Lerner: This is sort of a nomenclature issue because, in the Jewish tradition, we have an annual ritual of repentance, which requires us to go and make amends with anybody we have hurt, wittingly or unwittingly. Practicing Jews go through this process every fall, beginning on the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and ending on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, 10 days later. So ideally, yes, atonement is not just between you and God; it should also endeavor to make things rights with anyone we have hurt, treated unjustly, or been insensitive to.

Further, we believe that this practice is one that should be undertaken both personally and collectively. The collective component involves considering how and in what ways our society has gotten out of whack with the God energy of the universe. On the Day of Atonement we make decisions about what we are going to strive to do better in the coming year. It’s an intense process that involves other people. It’s not just a private matter. It involves making things right with our fellows, as well as personal spiritual self-examination: have we lived in accordance with our values in our spiritual life, our ethical life, and in our bodies? If not, what are we going to do in the coming year to give our bodies, our spiritual life, our ethical life, much greater attention so that we’re not in the same position a year later? And what we are willing to do in this coming year to become more actively involved in the societal healing—both political and
psychological—to transform the larger world.

The Hebrew word tikkun, which is what I named my magazine, means to heal, repair, and transform the world. That requires a tikkun of self and a tikkun of the world. Both of them come together, because if you transform yourself, you help transform the world; and if you heal the world, you will facilitate healing on the personal level too.

The MOON: Would you be willing to give an example of how atonement has worked in your own life both personally and collectively? I know you do so much on the collective level, but I think that people who are willing to atone collectively can feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. And then a lot of people aren’t even willing to consider that we have anything to atone for.

Lerner: On the personal level, the biggest issue that I have been working on for a long time, and which still keeps coming up, is the issue of male privilege and patriarchy. I’m very aware of the ways I assume the rights of, and powers that come to, men and don’t recognize deeply enough the ways that that can disempower or hurt women. This is an ongoing project for me every year, because when you grow up in a patriarchal society, you can’t simply throw off all of its conditioning in one fell swoop. So I’ve been part of a men’s movement, meeting with other men to explore those issues, and also very personally trying to recall and then seek forgiveness from anybody that I’ve personally hurt. I don’t think that there’s been a lot of intentional hurting, but there’s been a huge amount of unintentional hurting just by not being aware enough of the power differences that come from being a man in a patriarchal society. So I continue to work on it. I’ve reached out to various women I might have wronged. Many of them have said I haven’t wronged them, but for all I know, they may have just said that to spare my feelings. I understand the dynamics that can lead people to forgive you too quickly.

I’m 76 now, and I know that over the past, let’s say, 60 years, there have been many times I acted without real sensitivity to the women in my life. I’ve gone to many of these women to ask for forgiveness, and there are others that I don’t know how to find to ask for forgiveness. But asking for forgiveness is really only the easiest step. The most important step is to internalize it in a deep enough level that I am more aware and not doing it again in some more subtle or nuanced way. So it’s an ongoing struggle, and that’s why I love the brilliance of the Jewish tradition of atonement. It comes around every year and so every year, you’re forced to reexamine your life and hold yourself accountable. Does that help, in terms of a personal example?

The MOON: Yes. I’m very touched that you would even recognize and work so diligently on your perceived shortcomings, because I think of you as one of the people who is most aware already. Thank you for your willingness to do that.

Can you also give us an example of how atonement might work collectively?

Lerner: The first thing that others can do is to join our Network of Spiritual Progressives, which we created that as a way of doing societal atonement, and also as a way of providing a framework for people who that they can’t do anything meaningful; that the problems are too overwhelming and difficult to effectively change. I totally understand why anybody would feel overwhelmed when looking at the world today, both in the United States where we have narcissistic and quite possibly evil, forces running the society; and internationally, where the problems are perhaps even more complex and more difficult to influence. But that’s exactly why we created this network, so we could support each other and develop strategies to work with each other to heal and repairing the world.
We’ve lived in a society that, for several hundred years, has been based on individualism, selfishness, and materialism. In such a society, people feel that they are required to look out first and foremost, if not exclusively, for themselves, not because they are inherently evil, but because the structure of the society requires it. If they don’t, other people will take advantage of them, because everyone else has been conditioned the same way. I call this the Globalization of Selfishness, and it has spread its tentacles throughout the world. It’s no longer just advanced capitalist societies, but in societies that were previously “under-developed” in terms of their ability to accumulate money and power, but actually, were often at a higher spiritual and ethical level than the advanced industrial societies. Now, however, the ethos of global capitalism pervades the whole planet. There’s barely a place where people haven’t been pushed by the social and economic institutions to believe that everybody’s out for themselves and, if you’re a rational person, you have to do the same, without regard to the consequences for others.

The Network of Spiritual Progressives is a collective of people who don’t believe that’s true. I hope some of the people who read this will go to spiritualprogressives.org and consider joining. We actually have an online training you can find on the website, which teaches participants that A, they’re not alone; and B, there are techniques they can learn to become more effective at working towards transformation in the larger society.

And then, we have also produced Tikkun magazine, which has online articles every week, as well as a quarterly print magazine by subscription ($29/year), with articles by some of the smartest people in the world, with spiritual, psychological, and political depth, who are addressing the most important issues of our time. The very next issue, in fact, of the Tikkun magazine online, although you have to subscribe to access it, is called, “Beyond Patriarchy.” We’ve asked a number of different people to envision what it might be like to live in a world without patriarchy. One article in particular, by Martha Sonnenberg, imagines a dialogue between herself and the young girl, Lisa, from the TV show, The Simpsons. It’s so funny and so brilliant, and it’s an example of one of the articles. It’s a fabulous issue; I hope people will subscribe and check it out.

In the fall of 2019, the University of California Press will publish my book on The Revolutionary Possibility of Love. What I argue in it—and it’s really a central theme of the Network of Spiritual Progressives—is that most human beings actually want a world based on love, kindness, generosity, and caring for others—for everyone, not just for themselves—but they don’t believe it’s possible. So one of our central tasks is to help people overcome what I’ll call “being realistic” and recognize that every major change that’s happened in our society has been dismissed as totally unrealistic when it was first proposed. Then, after years, and sometimes decades, of struggle, the things that were said to be unrealistic have been achieved, at which point the very same people who said they were unrealistic have often said, “Oh, well, that was always going to happen. That was inevitable.”

[Laughter].

Understanding that is very important. So one of our most important tasks is to help people overcome their sense that the world that they really want, a world based on love, kindness, generosity, on caring for each other and for the Earth, is really possible. Almost everybody, and certainly an overwhelming majority of the nearly eight billion people on the planet, would vote for that. But they believe the people who tell us they’re “not being realistic” and end up settling for a world that they don’t actually want. Repentance and atonement are part of that process. Repentance and atonement on the public level
require us to say, “Okay, I am no longer going to buy that. And I am no longer going to add my voice to those who tell other people that the world of love and kindness and generosity is impossible. On the contrary, I’m going to stand with all the people who want that kind of a world.” That’s why the title of the book is The Revolutionary Possibility of Love.

People fear that, by going for what they really want, they’ll lose the opportunity to make incremental progress. But what we in the Network of Spiritual Progressives and at Tikkun magazine have been saying for years is that, while we’re working so hard for little changes, the larger environmental picture keeps getting worse and worse. We need to address the larger picture. We have an environmental crisis, which is literally destroying the life support system of the planet and leave none of us around to enjoy the little changes we have made.

It’s not that the incremental changes are meaningless. They’re important because they give people confidence that they do have the power to change things. But let’s not stop there. Now is the time to articulate our most expansive vision of the world we’d really want to live in. And then join us in the Network for Spiritual Progressives and work to make it happen. What we want is a new bottom line: not the one that decides policy based on how much money and power is generated, although they use terms like “rational” or “productive,” or “efficient.” What’s it more efficient at? Making money. But that’s the old bottom line. We want a new bottom line in which efficiency, rationality, and productivity are measured by rewarding human beings for acting in loving, caring, kind, and generous ways that are environmentally sensitive and strengthening of social and economic justice. We want policies that look at other human beings, not as vehicles to achieve utilitarian ends, but as embodiments of the sacred, who deserve to be cared for just because of who they are. We want policies that consider the universe, and particularly planet Earth, not solely from the standpoint of how it can be a turned into a product that’s useful for human beings. I’m not against doing that to some extent, but we also have to look at the Earth and universe from the standpoint of awe, wonder, and radical amazement at the grandeur and magnificent mystery of all being. [Laughter] That’s what the New Bottom Line is about. I believe that we’ll get more people to come out of the closet as spiritual progressives by encouraging them to work for what they really want. To say, “Yeah, I want a world in which things are judged efficient, rational, and productive to the extent that they maximize love, caring, kindness, and generosity, ethical and environmental sensitivity, awe and wonder at the universe.”

The MOON: It seems that a lot of Christians don’t believe that they need to atone because Christ did that for them.

Lerner: In every religion—in fact, in every worldview, including anti-religious worldviews—there are those who believe that if you want to survive in this world you have to learn the skills of domination, control, and power over others. That’s just “being realistic.” That worldview leads to a vision of homeland security that says we have to dominate other countries, or have the means to dominate other countries and the willingness to threaten it, or at the very least be in alliance with others to dominate the rest of the world. In our personal lives, it results in a belief that, “I’ve got to get the upper hand in every interaction. Otherwise, I’ve lost.”

Then there is another worldview that says, “No, actually you don’t have to dominate others to get what you want. In fact, your safety depends on there being more love and kindness and generosity in the world.” So these are the two alternatives, and almost every worldview—religious or otherwise, including feminism, Marxism, Islam, and
others—has representatives of one, or the other, or both in it. Inside Christianity, as well as inside Judaism and every other world religion, these two worldviews are continually pulling people in one direction or the other. We read the holy texts in different ways depending upon which of these two worldviews predominates. That shapes how people understand what they must do to achieve atonement.

I don’t pretend to be an expert on Christianity, so there may well be some Christians who believe that Jesus made it unnecessary for the rest of us to have to atone because his death was a death for us all. But I know there are other Christians who don’t take that perspective at all. They believe that Jesus gave us an example of how we should live. In other words, that a good Christian will be Christ-like in his or her actions.

The latter reading of what Jesus stood for is one of the reasons that many Jews see Jesus as one of our great Jewish prophets.

The MOON: What might atonement, or making amends, do for Americans?

Lerner: I think it would be valuable for our whole society to dedicate 10 days of focus, nationwide, to reaching out to people we have hurt or may have hurt. And to also spend that time examining our relationship to the world. For example, we have now between 60 and 70 million refugees in the world. How are we going to take care of them? What are we going to do about that? We’re going to pretend they’re going to go away? On the contrary, if we don’t repair our environment very, very quickly there are going to be billions, that’s a B, billions of refugees—climate change refugees as much of the world goes under water. So we have a huge amount of work to do together. It would be great for all of us if we could declare a 10-day, or a five-day period, whatever, it doesn’t have to be on the Jewish model, in which the whole society is focused on the transformations we need to make and what our individual roles should be, both personally and collectively, to make this world more in alignment with the values we each hold. Taking atonement seriously would be a tremendous gift to humanity and to each of us individually.

The MOON: In 2016, we watched the moving display of Wesley Clark, Jr., and other veterans washing the feet of Native American activists at Standing Rock. Then more recently, we saw disturbing images of MAGA hat-wearing teens taunting a Native American elder who was standing between the youth and the Black Hebrew Israelites, drumming. In some of the discourse, I hear people saying that we don’t owe a debt to the sins of our fathers and forefathers. Why should we have to make amends to Native Americans, when we personally didn’t throw them off their land? Or why should we have to make reparations to African Americans, when we didn’t hold slaves. How can we resolve some of these bitter differences?

Lerner: The first thing we have to do is to listen to the people who are saying that and understand that they’ve got a point. They personally have not been responsible for creating patriarchy or racism or homophobia or anti-Semitism, and when progressives come at them as though they personally are the evil people, it closes their ears to any capacity to hear what is being said. So I’m advocating first for repentance in the liberal and progressive world. When the person who received the most votes for president in 2016, Hillary Clinton, said that half of Trump’s supporters were “a basket of deplorables,” that was heard very, very clearly by tens of millions of people as some version of, “To hell with you. You’re either racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, or you’re just plain stupid to not be with us.” So we progressives have to repent for that as step number one, because people cannot hear anything else we say as long as we’re approaching them with an arrogant and superior attitude.
Step number two is to teach in our schools from the start of our kids’ education about the way in which racism and sexism and homophobia and anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have been ingrained into our culture, affecting us all, whether we were responsible for it, or not. Just as young kids have become very sensitive to the environmental crisis, they can also become sensitive to these other ethical problems in our society. But they have to know something about them first. The kids from Covington Catholic High School, for example, and who have now been invited by the president to come to the White House, probably never learned anything about the true history of injustice and discrimination in our country. So instead of judging them as evil or stupid, we have to ask, “What can we do to provide a way for people to learn about what we’ve learned? And how do we do that in a way that doesn’t alienate them from the start?”

The next step, perhaps, is to utilize social media and other accessible platforms to do a little bit of cultural expectation raising, similar to what Gillette has done with its new commercial “The Best Men Can Be.” The ad shows men talking to each other and to young boys about how we behave in relationship with women, as well as with each other. It shows men, in a friendly way, holding each other accountable for things like ogling, or catcalling. It also includes a little snippet of two boys probably nine or 10 years old, fighting in the schoolyard, and another man running to intervene and saying, “No, this isn’t the way to solve our problems.” This is an example of using the media to spread messages that counter the messages of domination, power over, and cruelty.

The MOON: Might apologizing for past mistakes be difficult for those who worry that it will open the door for actions they’re not prepared to take? For example, if we acknowledge what we did to Native Americans and African Americans, we might open the door to reparations?

Lerner: I’m in favor of reparations and believe that a major step in healing our painful past is to provide adequate reparations to the survivors of the genocide of Native Americans, as well as the horrific conditions that were imposed for 400 years on African Americans during slavery, in the subsequent period of segregation, and in the continuing brutalization of African Americans by many police forces.

However, I don’t believe that’s a good place to start in repairing our relationships. I’m afraid that moving in that direction right now would provoke a larger counter-reaction, so that a first step instead would be to acknowledge the suffering of all people in our society apart from America’s ruling elite, so while I totally support reparations, I don’t believe they’re a wise first step in ending racism in our society.

Instead, I believe that progressive forces should address the trauma in our society with empathy and caring, rather than projecting a spirit of superiority and put-down of others that seems to suggest that all whites or all men are evil. If we want to transform our society, we need to take an empathic and open-hearted approach to the American people; not a judgmental approach. That’s the only way to build trust. We call the elements of this approach “radical love” and “prophetic empathy” (which is empathy that challenges ideas that put down others).

There’s a lot more to understand that you get in the eight-week training we offer. It teaches how to develop empathic skills that are useful in the process of reaching out to people who don’t share our ideas yet. So I hope people will go to our website: spiritualprogressives.org/training.
The MOON: There’s a lot of emotional pain to be overcome, in order to be present, to some of that anger and hostility. For example, I found it exceedingly difficult to watch the videos of the young men taunting the Native American drumming, or to even read the angry exchanges on Facebook.

Lerner: Yes, I agree.

The MOON: So how does one acquire that fortitude or emotional strength or openness or curiosity or–?

Lerner: It’s a skill that has to be taught and then practiced. We have to develop the capacity to see things that are hurtful or evil and engage with people who have done things that are hurtful in a way that makes it possible for them to hear us and slowly to move them towards a different way of thinking about the world.

The MOON: Can you give an example of a time that you were able to do that even though it was difficult?

Lerner: Well, I mean, I’ve–

The MOON: Done it all your life, I know [laughter].

Lerner: Yeah. As part of my work with the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, for many years I facilitated small groups of people who met together weekly for about 10 weeks, during which many of the participants had amazing transformations. It’s not a process that can be easily summarized, so I say again, “Go take the training.”

I can share with you one interesting incident, though. In the early 200s, I wrote an op-ed in response to some right-wingers who were saying that the civil liberties people and the Jews were stealing Christmas by insisting that religious Christmas celebrations and iconography shouldn’t be in public space all the time. My op-ed said this was a false charge. Fox News host Bill O’Reilly invited me to be on his show to talk with him about this, and my friends said, “Don’t go. It’s a set-up. He won’t let you speak. He’s famous for interrupting people.”

Nevertheless, I accepted and went on the show, and as soon as he said, “You and the civil libertarians, are all robbing us of Christmas,” I said, “You know, you’re right. Somebody is robbing us of the spiritual and ethical message that underlies Christmas, but it’s not the Jews or civil libertarians. It’s the capitalist ethos of this society, which tells people that their value is in how much they can afford to spend in gifts to show others that they care about them, rather than any other way of caring. It’s really the ethos of capitalism that is undermining Christmas, along with our capacity to value other human beings in non-material terms.” Well, the guy was flabbergasted. He said, “Wow. I’ve never heard anybody say that. You’re right, Rabbi Lerner. That’s true.” And so [laughter]-

The MOON: That’s awesome.

Lerner: Yeah. So it was a very different exchange than he expected, and it was an example of changing our communications by stepping into the perspective of the other, so that our communications, too, can be received.