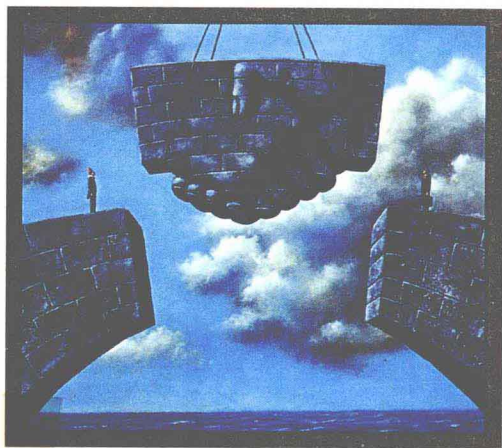


"The Politics of Meaning is an important, engaging book."

—The New York Times

MICHAEL LERNER

THE
POLITICS
OF
MEANING



**RESTORING HOPE AND POSSIBILITY
IN AN AGE OF CYNICISM**

WITH A NEW EPILOGUE BY THE AUTHOR

POLITICS
OF
MEANING



Restoring Hope and Possibility
in an Age of Cynicism

MICHAEL LERNER



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THE POLITICS
OF MEANING

OTHER BOOKS BY MICHAEL LERNER

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The Socialism of Fools:
Anti-Semitism on the Left

To Peter Gabel

Peter Gabel is the president of New College of California and associate editor of *Tikkun* magazine, and cofounded with me the Institute for Labor and Mental Health in Oakland, California. We spent two decades working together as psychotherapists and social theorists, analyzing the psychodynamics of American society. We critiqued one-dimensional New Age philosophies, much of contemporary psychoanalytic theory, political correctness on the Left, and the conventional social and political theory that predominates in academia and in the media. It is sometimes difficult for me to remember which of the ideas in this book came from which of us. Peter's brilliance and insight were invaluable in the development of many of these ideas, and he might reasonably have been listed as a coauthor.

Acknowledgments



Most of the ideas in this book derive from the Bible and from all that I have learned from the biblically based religious traditions, from my study and practice of psychoanalysis, and from various progressive political movements of the past centuries, particularly feminism and ecological theory. I have avoided footnotes because I hope the book will be useful to people who would feel intimidated by a more scholarly discussion of many of these issues. Yet I am well aware that my perspective, like all intellectual work, is deeply dependent on thousands of thinkers who went before me and on whose shoulders I stand. It is also dependent on the efforts of millions of people who have been engaged through the generations in the often thankless task of healing and repairing this world. Their experience comprises the “unwritten Torah” that I have learned by listening to their distilled wisdom as passed down

through the thousands of social change activists, psychotherapists, theologians, spiritual renewalists, ecologists, social theorists, and teachers whom I have met over my thirty-two years of involvement in healing work.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the contribution to my thinking of Abraham Joshua Heschel, z"l (of blessed memory), my teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary; Richard Lichtman, the chair of my doctoral committee in philosophy at the University of California; and the inspirational writings of Robert Bellah, Jessica Benjamin, Victor Frankl, Emanuel Levinas, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Wilhelm Reich. I appreciate the research done on this manuscript by Sarah Tobias; the editing by Alice Chasan; and the input and advice I received from Michael Bader, Tzvi Blanchard, Sam Bowles, Lynn Chancer, Herbert Gintis, Abby Layton, Lee Shore, Nanette Schore, Andrew Samuels, Sharon Welch, and Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman. The support of *Tikkun* staffers Pearl Gluck, Mark Levine, Beth Levy, and Martha Mendelsohn freed me to do some of this writing, and is gratefully acknowledged.

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I wish to thank my sister, Trish Vradenburg, whose humor has enthralled readers and television viewers for several decades, and whose brilliance, liveliness, and wit continue to inspire and delight me. Her love and loyalty are a further inspiration.

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that remain for the rest of us. His being testifies to the possibility of what we could be, and thus has given me the strength to more fully embrace the most hopeful aspects of Judaism and of a progressive politics of meaning.

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THE POLITICS OF MEANING

Introduction



Most Americans hunger for meaning and purpose in life. Yet we are caught within a web of cynicism that makes us question whether there could be any higher purpose besides material self-interest and looking out for number one. We see around us the destructive consequences of the dominant ethos of selfishness and materialism. People treat one another as objects to be manipulated rather than as beings who have a fundamental worth that ought to be respected and even cherished. Many of our cultural and economic institutions teach us to look at the world from a narrow, results-oriented, materialist perspective. In the process we lose touch with the awe and wonder we experienced as children at the grandeur of the universe. We get rewarded for the degree to which we have been able to put our own interests above those of our neighbors and friends, but then find ourselves in a world filled with mutual distrust and loneliness.

At the same time that we are caught in cynicism, however, we are desperate for hope. We hunger to be recognized by others, to be cherished for our own sakes and not for what we have accomplished or possess, and to be acknowledged as people who care about something higher and more important than our own self-interest. We hunger also for communities of meaning that can transcend the individualism and selfishness that we see around us and that will provide an ethical and spiritual framework that gives our lives some higher purpose. Some of us find those communities of meaning in a religious or nationalist framework, others in social change movements, still others in the framework of shared intellectual or artistic activity. These arenas may differ from one another in political, religious, or philosophical dogma, but they all promise something in common to their participants—that our fundamental value as human beings will be recognized and cherished within this context, and that our desire for connection to a community and to higher meaning for our lives will be nourished. It is this sense of the intrinsic worth of human beings and of our connection to something higher to which biblical religions refer when speaking of human beings as created in the image of God.

The “politics of meaning” that I call for in this book seeks to translate this ancient biblical truth into a contemporary language that can also be grasped by a nonreligious person. I am calling for a “politics of the image of God,” an attempt to reconstruct the world in a way that really takes seriously the uniqueness and preciousness of every human being and our connection to a higher ethical and spiritual purpose that gives meaning to our lives.

There are millions of people *already* involved in seeking to build lives that are more ethically and spiritually grounded and meaningful. They do not have to be convinced that this endeavor is important. What this book seeks to do is to help them recognize one another, and recognize that their desire for ethical and spiritual lives need not be isolated from their “real-world” activities, but rather could become the basis for reshaping that “real world.” The powerful desire of so many of us to escape the distorting impact of the materialism and selfishness of daily life could become a powerful motivating force for changing the way we organize our world,

so that we no longer have to escape from it. That is part of the task of a politics of meaning.

The Hunger for Meaning

The idea of a politics of meaning emerged from the work that a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, family therapists, union activists, and social theorists pioneered in Oakland, California, starting in 1976. Our aim was to better understand the psychodynamics of middle-income working people, and also to try to understand why so many of them were moving to the political Right. We set up a Stress Clinic that was explicitly *not* psychotherapy-oriented, and worked extensively with the labor movement and various corporations to attract a range of people who might never have dreamt of going to therapy. Within our Stress Clinic we created occupational stress groups and family support groups aimed at training people to deal with the problems that any mentally healthy person would likely face at work or in family life.

What we learned from the thousands of people who participated in these groups challenged many of the beliefs that prevailed among us, and, more generally, in the liberal culture from which we researchers had come. We had thought of ourselves as psychologically sophisticated when we started this work, but we quickly learned that our assumptions about middle-income Americans were mistaken, prejudiced, and elitist. For example, most of us imagined that most Americans are motivated primarily by material self-interest. So we were surprised to discover that these middle Americans often experience more stress from feeling that they are wasting their lives doing meaningless work than from feeling that they are not making enough money.

We found middle-income people deeply unhappy because they hunger to serve the common good and to contribute something with their talents and energies, yet find that their actual work gives them little opportunity to do so. They often turn to demands for more money as a compensation for a life that otherwise feels frustrating and empty. In the Left and among many academics it has

been almost a rule of reason to believe that what people *really* care about is their own material well-being, and that believing anything else is just some kind of populist romanticization. But we uncovered a far deeper desire—the desire to have meaningful work, work that people believe would contribute to some higher purpose than self-advancement.

True enough, many people told us that it is just common sense to try to get as much money as possible—precisely because most have given up on ever finding a work situation in which they can use their talents for some higher purpose. And yet what we learned was that many of these people hate living in a world governed by a money-oriented ethos, even as they simultaneously believe that it is impossible to change such a world.

Too often, people blame themselves. They internalize the dominant view of society—that they live in a society based on merit. In this meritocracy, whatever they get is what they deserve. Ironically, many of the working people we interviewed know that merit is often not the major factor for advancement at their own workplaces. They frequently told stories of supervisors who know less than those whom they supervise, or of favoritism in promotions based on personal relationships. Similarly, many of our interviewees understand that most of those people in the one percent of the population that owns forty percent of the wealth in the United States have not earned that wealth, but rather inherited much of it, or at least enough to give them a competitive edge in “making it.”

Yet so deep is the collective belief in the meritocracy, that these very same people whom we interviewed have often adopted the meritocratic framework to explain their own lives. They believe that if they lack satisfaction in their personal lives, it must be due to some inadequacy in themselves. Most people have developed a complex personal story of how they screwed things up. It explains why they have been unable to find work that would more adequately fulfill their need for meaning and purpose, and why they have failed to build lives in which they receive greater recognition and caring from others.

Naturally, most people do not present this hunger for meaning as the first thing that they tell you about their lives. On the contrary precisely because they have bought the meritocratic fantasy tha