

Why I Write for *Tikkun*

Cornel West

This will be the first in a series of columns I shall be writing for *Tikkun*. Some people have asked why an African-American theorist and activist has chosen to write a column for *Tikkun*. Let me explain.

Those of us willing to live and die for the precious values of individuality and democracy face a dilemma. On the one hand, the great secular traditions of the modern West that promoted these values in varying degrees—liberalism, socialism, feminism—are either culturally impoverished, spiritually sterile, or politically on the defensive. On the other hand, the major alternatives of the present—tribalistic religion, chauvinistic nationalism, and complacent professionalism—are morally bankrupt. How do we remain true to our universal moral convictions, our *rooted* personal and collective identities, and our international progressive political allegiances in the face of present-day realities?

Tikkun has grappled with the question in a serious manner. It is one of the few forums in our culture which has linked cultural and spiritual identity, moral integrity, and progressive politics. I have chosen to write for *Tikkun* because I am convinced that a vital and principled Left in our time has no future unless it confronts the complex interplay of tradition, morality, and emancipatory politics. If such a Left has no future, then unnecessary and undesirable human suffering will remain unacknowledged and unabated.

The national response to the recent visit of Nelson Mandela reveals a deep hunger for progressive leadership of dignity and humility. Whatever differences one may have with Mandela's statements or strategies, there is no doubt that he is a genuine statesman who leads a liberation movement that transcends tribalism, chauvinism, and egotism. In this sense, he dwarfs every national leader on the American scene today. Acknowledging the legitimacy of some criticisms of Mandela, we can nevertheless marvel at the degree to which he has merged tradition, spirituality, integrity, intelligence, and emancipatory energy.

Some of what excites me about Mandela also excites me about *Tikkun*. Both Mandela and *Tikkun* search for

the empowering sources for struggle within a conception of tradition that accents critique and resistance to evil and oppression. Mandela finds this within the rich heritage of the Xhosa people (itself a hybrid of traditional and Christian elements), the leftist vision and analyses of the African National Congress (ANC), and the flexible outlooks of principled South African freedom fighters. *Tikkun* looks to the prophetic traditions of Judaism (especially that of the great Abraham Joshua Heschel), the secular inquiries of socialist, feminist, and antixenophobic streams, and the antidogmatic viewpoints of principled Jewish freedom fighters. Second, both Mandela and *Tikkun* are committed to collective quests for self-determination of oppressed peoples in the modern world—in particular, Black South Africans and Jews.

Let me briefly consider the difference between these two important movements for freedom and their situations at the present moment.

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First, consider the Jewish struggle. Despite the incredible pain and destructiveness of the Holocaust and the tolls of lingering anti-Semitism around the world, the Jewish quest for positive self-identity and national self-determination has yielded some significant advances for the Jewish people in the past forty-two years. Since May 1948, it has built a new and thriving culture, and a nation-state—a remarkable achievement in its own right, but all the more so considering that one-third of the Jewish people had just been murdered. On the American domestic front, the Jewish struggle has yielded similarly powerful results—a speedy upward mobility from relative poverty at the beginning of the century to middle-class security and prosperity in the past forty years.

Needless to say, the advances in both Israel and the United States came at a high cost. In Israel, national self-determination was achieved only at the expense of some brutal and at times barbaric treatment of the Palestinian people—and this has left a legacy of hatred that

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continues to eat at the core of Israeli society. Similarly, in the U.S., while large sectors of American Jews have remained faithful to a liberal political perspective, Jewish leadership and organizations have moved in a conservative direction, creating the impression on the part of many other Americans that some Jews are insensitive to their concerns.

Now, let's consider the struggle for Black South Africa. That struggle has not yet achieved a nation-state. Indeed, despite recent advances since Mandela was released from prison, millions of South Africans still live in poverty, are brutalized by the South African state, and are denied the fundamental right to political self-determination in their own country. In the U.S., while African-Americans have achieved important political advances, the economic system has not presented them with opportunities similar to those allowed other ethnic groups.

Yet despite the differences in the situations facing our two peoples, there are still some crucial grounds for common visions and actions. Mandela and *Tikkun* embody some of these common ideals. I can understand why some Jews might be upset with Mandela: his refusal to condemn the dictatorial rules of Fidel Castro and Moammar Qaddafi, the ugly anti-Semitism of the PLO, or racism in the U.S. is regrettable. Mandela is a prophet bound by the discipline of the ANC. Every prophet deserves criticism. And in this case, it is appropriate. But in offering that criticism, we need not detract from the obvious wisdom and witness of a man who, in the midst of a fierce struggle for national self-determination, nevertheless insists on a nonracist vision of a society to be fought for.

As an African-American freedom fighter, anchored in the prophetic Christian tradition and linked to the democratic-socialist heritage, I believe it is imperative that Black and Jewish progressives reflect seriously on the Mandela example and the project of *Tikkun* in order to keep alive the precious values of individuality and democracy while strengthening the possibilities of principled coalition across racial lines in the U.S. I am neither a Zionist nor a South African Nationalist. In fact, I am deeply suspicious of any nationalism, but I recognize that nationalism is an inescapable and brutal fact of our world. Therefore, progressive nationalists such as Michael Lerner, Nelson Mandela, Edward Said, and post-Mecca Malcolm X are comrades for me in that they uphold universal moral outlooks and international perspectives, though all, of course, have human flaws

and, at times, selective focuses. Needless to say, I relate to Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X on a visceral and existential level because they speak to and embody my daily experience of coping with assaults on Black humanity—on Black intelligence, beauty, and character. Yet my moral and political link to them is no more and no less than that to other progressive nationalists.

I'm drawn to *Tikkun* because it strives toward this kind of highly principled integration of nationalist and universalist concerns. Its critique of chauvinism makes it a distinctive voice in the Jewish world. A progressive Zionist group wedded to prophetic Judaism and emancipatory politics, *Tikkun* has supported progressive elements in Israeli society and culture, endorsed Palestinian national self-determination, and tried to offset conservative sentiments amongst American Jewry. I'm aware that it has taken considerable courage to do this and that *Tikkun* has lost financial and political support because it is willing to take unequivocal moral stands while others in the Jewish world are not. Yet *Tikkun* has also been one of the best vehicles for building bridges for the Jewish people, precisely because it has effectively helped explain to the Left and to communities of color in the U.S. and around the world that the Jewish experience of relative economic success and social acceptance in the U.S. is *not* paradigmatic for most Jews in the modern or premodern world. *Tikkun* has helped educate us to view the Jewish people with compassion based on a deeper understanding of the historical experience that shaped its current realities. In fact, *Tikkun* is one of the most effective instruments the Jewish people has for fighting the potential growth of anti-Semitism, precisely because it can serve as a bridge and speak to people with other cultural and historical assumptions, people who are too often ignored or misunderstood by other voices in the Jewish world.

Yet it is not solely because of what *Tikkun* stands for in the Jewish world that I am attracted to it. *Tikkun* is creating the kind of dialogue in the U.S. that addresses the important questions that any progressive intellectual must confront—the issues of how to raise and integrate a moral vision and spiritual sensitivity into the political arena. So I write for *Tikkun* in order to sharpen the dialogue between those of us who still have the audacity in this ghastly century to believe in the possibility of social change in light of the precious values of individuality and democracy, values some of us link to prophetic elements in our respective religious traditions. □