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Rabbi Michael Lerner - Editor, Tikkun Magazine

The Assassination of Osama Bin Laden: A Spiritual Response

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The Jewish tradition has much to say on the killing of our vicious and even murderous enemies.

When Pharaoh's troops were drowning in the Red Sea as they sought to re-enslave or kill the Israelites, the angels began to sing praises (the Hallel prayers: Psalms 113-118). According to the Talmud, God chastened them: "My children (the Egyptians) are sinking in the sea, and you are singing praises?"

Yet God did not silence the Israelites, knowing that at that moment it would be hard for humans not to celebrate the death of an oppressor.

Nevertheless, the Jewish tradition then instituted two practices in accord with God's response: first, that the Hallel prayers would be cut down to a partial saying of some of the psalms on the last six days of Passover; and second, that when we do the Seder on Passover and recite the plagues that were used against the Egyptians to get them to free the Jews, we put our finger in the cup of wine, symbolic of our joy, and dip out a drop of wine for each plague -- this symbolizes that our cup of joy cannot be full if our own liberation requires the death of those who were part of the oppressor society.

It is the loss of this consciousness by almost every society on the planet that is a real source for concern and mourning. For far too many people, the war on terrorism seems to be an extension of the football games where we cheer on our team: "USA! USA! Hey, you are tough!"

The task of spiritual progressives at this moment is to reaffirm a different consciousness -- to remind ourselves that we are inextricably bound to each other and to everyone on the planet.

The struggle against terrorism will not be won through killing, no matter how many people we assassinate. You don't fight malaria by seeking to kill every mosquito on the planet, but rather by draining the swamps. Similarly, you can't eliminate terrorism by seeking to kill every terrorist (and in the process killing a lot of innocent others as well), but only by draining the swamps of hatred that have been built up as a response to the suffering generated by global inequities and injustices. So the struggle to eliminate terror will only be won when we in the West can show genuine love, caring, and generosity toward everyone else on the planet. A strategy of generosity, not a strategy of domination, is the path forward.

Now that Osama is dead, let's get our troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan now! The money saved from that alone would make a great down-payment on the Global Marshall Plan we

badly need (and we could start it in the Middle East). Congressman Keith Ellison has already introduced this plan as House Resolution 157. If the U.S. took the leadership in getting a consortium of advanced industrial societies to dedicate 1-2% of their gross domestic product each year for the next twenty years to funding a Global Marshall Plan such as the Network of Spiritual Progressives has designed to once and for all end global poverty, hunger, homelessness, inadequate education and inadequate health care while repairing the global environment, we would defeat terrorism in the only way possible (download the full version at SpiritualProgressives.org/GMP).

I understand very well the need for self-defense in a violent world, as well as the rage and upset felt by many, including me, at the murder of innocent civilians on September 11 and on many other occasions. Within the current distorted framework of military conflict in which we are to some degree entrapped, I also understand the strategic importance of capturing or, if there is no other way to stop them from sending more murderers to kill innocent civilians (and every other possible route has been tried), then self-defensively killing the leaders of those who seek to kill or terrorize our own people. But the fact remains that it is through new policies of generosity and caring for others, not through killing the bad guys, that we will create a world of peace. To the extent that Americans celebrate the death of bin Laden because they believe that it will bring peace to the world, I want to acknowledge the goodness and decency of that aspiration. Yet we as spiritual progressives must simultaneously help our fellow Americans, indeed, our fellow human beings in every society, see that it is the path of nonviolence and the Strategy of Generosity that is the only path toward lasting peace on our planet.

So this is a moment to pray that this new consciousness will spread quickly through our planet, and a moment when all of us can and should renew our dedication to promoting a spirit of love, caring for others, and true generosity. Let us pray that that becomes the path of all countries on our planet.

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