



Clarifying My Relationship to Recent "No, Mr. Sharon" Ad Placed by Tikkun Magazine Supporters in the New York Times

Rabbi Irwin Kula

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Dear Friends,

I want to clarify the confusion created by the appearance of an advertisement in Friday's *New York Times* entitled "No, Mr. Sharon," placed by the supporters of *Tikkun* magazine. Although I was a member of the advisory board of the Tikkun Community (I resigned this morning) and my name appears in that capacity at the bottom of the page, I deliberately did not sign the "No Mr. Sharon" ad because of its inflammatory language. [Note: Michael Lerner apologized in a note written to Irwin Kula which said that he knew that Irwin was not to be associated with this ad, but that his name had been accidentally included.]

I do believe that American Jews are far less monolithic in their support of the present policies of the government of Israel than is publicly acknowledged. I also feel that the increased number of Israeli reservists who have refused to serve in the territories, at significant personal anguish and cost, deserve the vocal public support of those American Jews who to date have been supportive in private conversations. Most importantly, I think that, in light of recent events, we need to more seriously raise the question of the political, security and moral costs of the Israeli presence in the territories. However, I was deeply distressed by the inflammatory language of the ad and the accompanying abhorrent cartoon, and was embarrassed to be associated with it, even if unintentionally.

Additionally, I very much regret the inflammatory and unnecessary reference to AIPAC. As AIPAC supporters who know me can attest, I have had a supportive relationship with AIPAC for close to twenty years. I have served as a scholar in residence at AIPAC retreats and led study sessions for AIPAC members. I have often told the story of how in the mid 1980s as a young rabbi in St. Louis, a wonderful senior leader, Gene Weissman, took me to my first AIPAC conference in Washington. That experience changed my life. Through it I realized for the first time the shift in the Jewish condition from powerlessness to power, and how

that shift required new kinds of Jewish behaviors/responsibilities/mitzvot, and new institutional expressions of those responsibilities. It is simply naive and ludicrous to represent the Tikkun Community as an alternative to AIPAC, and it is a misrepresentation of my understanding of what the Tikkun Community was when I agreed to serve on its advisory board. AIPAC clearly plays a unique and critical role in American Jewish life, and those who know the institution know that there is deep and meaningful debate within AIPAC ranks that extends from right to left, whatever decisions are eventually reached.

Reading the Israeli newspapers almost every day, I am both astounded and impressed by the intensity and vigor of debate within Israeli society. By the same token, I have been deeply upset by the stark lack of debate within the organized American Jewish community regarding the same issues. In recent months so many people - from major lay and professional leaders, to disconnected Jews I meet in the airports around this country - have confided in me their desire to raise questions about current events, and their fear of being silenced, embarrassed, and even ostracized. I have always believed that one of the great insights of Judaism is its demand for ongoing wrestling and dialogue to discover the truth. To question our own views as they inevitably harden, and other people's views as they do the same, is the way to discover what is truly demanded of us. It is obvious that no present policy in the Middle East is working, as children, women and men continue to be killed. We need new ways of thinking.

While I may indeed be wrong, I believe that new ways of thinking will only emerge as people with contradictory opinions are able to engage in intellectually complex and emotionally challenging conversation. My experience is that for a variety of reasons this is not happening within the American Jewish community, at great cost to creating a more engaged and dynamic Jewish body politic, and at the price of not developing new ideas about the future. Passionate yet respectful debate, not consensus, will yield the new synthesis and quantum leaps that generate entirely new frameworks. No one individual or institution is to blame, but we are all responsible. We need more debate, not less. We need more loving disunity, not forced consensus. We need to hear each other's voices in all their rich particularity, rather than fashion a too quick "unified" position that misses the genuine truths of the particular.

However, none of this is to excuse my having lent my name without carefully watching the details for how my name would be used. For this I take full responsibility, and I am very sorry. In an attempt to raise questions for people who may respect my teaching, I have created unnecessary anger that only makes it more difficult for us to be open to different views. Moreover, the inflammatory language to which my name was associated hurt people with whom I share an obsessive love for the people and State of Israel. Again, for this I am sorry.

I have always felt that one of my most important strengths is my ability to speak and teach in multiple communities holding contradictory views. Be it giving a *shiur* in an Orthodox shul, or a sermon in a Reform Temple, delivering a lecture at a major gifts dinner for Federation or a session at Jewish Renewal, teaching a class of rabbis or presenting Torah on Oprah, I have been able to speak across divides. I do this by trying to understand the deeper truths that lie behind passionately expressed different opinions. I look for the deep truths that surface truths often conceal. In this case, I neither helped my friends in the Tikkun Community to articulate their views in a way that respects alternative views, nor helped my longtime friends on the right to hear any new questions. The inflammatory language simply was venting of anger on one side and an invitation to be angry on the other - precisely the opposite of what is needed, and what I do, and what CLAL does, around the country. Again for this I apologize.

It is precisely people with disagreements, but similar motivations of love and solidarity for the State of Israel, who need to engage in genuine conversations. But they can do so only when there is a sense of humility and the consequent willingness to search for some insight and truth on the other side - not in order to simply assume the other's view, but to help shape, sharpen and nuance one's own view. Unfortunately, because of the inflammatory language of the ad, more anger resulted, rather than more debate.

I trust that the relationships I have developed with the many people with whom I have studied over the years, with the people with whom I have traveled to Israel, with those with whom I have raised money for Israel, and with people with whom I have stood in love and solidarity for Israel, will transcend the present anger and disappointment.

I pray that together, across the many fault lines in contemporary Jewish life, we can create a more vibrant and vital Jewish citizenry, one engaged in open and unbounded debate, but always with the appropriate *kavod* a fellow image of God and a fellow Jew deserves. In just a few nights we will all be sitting at the Seder table. Seder is the most widely observed practice in Jewish life. This means that all kinds of Jews- right and left, every denomination, unaffiliated and overaffiliated, believers and non-believers, secular and religious, wise and evil, simple and those who can't even ask - will be sitting down at the same table for conversation, wine, and food. The more the story is told, and the more ways in which the story is told, the more praiseworthy will be the storytellers.

May you have a *chag kasher* and *sameach*. May we all know the peace that for millennia we have associated with Jerusalem.

Irwin Kula