

Arthur Green on National Repentance



AMERICA NEEDS A REVOLUTION IN VALUES. THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN PROVIDES A TERRIBLE burden for your administration; we wish you Godspeed in response to this challenge. But the downturn also provides a moment of extraordinary opportunity for a nation to examine itself, to question where its values have gone astray, and to bring about an event of collective national repentance, a term from the religious vocabulary that I am suggesting you use in a political/social context. In what areas does America need to repent? You know them well, but let me highlight a few:

- The pollution of the term “democracy.” We have made it less about government by the people’s will and more about laissez-faire capitalism and the unfettered free-market economy. We need to redeem “democracy” from meaning “anything that is good for American interests.” Help us to repent of this perversion of our most precious legacy. The exporting of democracy has to be undertaken carefully and responsibly, and always with a sense of its true meaning in mind.
- The fear of the “other.” Thank God, we live in a world of rich diversity, culturally and spiritually, as well as biologically. America is the world’s most diverse nation-state; your presidency must be used as an ongoing celebration and underscoring of that fact. Ending “the politics of fear” means teaching white Americans (including those who did not vote for you) not to fear blacks; Christian and Jewish Americans not to be afraid of Muslims; heterosexual Americans not to fear gays or gay marriage; Anglo-Americans not to fear the sound of Spanish, etc. You can do much of this by personal example. Please do. But policy in many areas will encourage this repentance as well.
- Self-indulgence and comfort-seeking. The amassing of wealth and the comforts it brings have become our society’s obsession. They are now perversely described as “the American dream.” I urge you to set a tone of modesty in the way you live, even in the White House, especially in these difficult times for so many. You will be greatly admired for it. But turn it into an opportunity for moral education, as well. We can do with less, and we will all need to do with less if our planet and species are to survive. Help us—by policy and example—to repent of our overconsumption and our dangerous assumption of comfort as a “right.”
- The denigration of “service.” This period of high unemployment is a moment to be seized, a time to create an array of nonmilitary options for serving our society and helping to re-establish a sense of the American Community, one that reaches across lines of class, faith, and ethnicity. There has to be a value in life to compete with making money or “getting ahead” in society. The ideal of serving others needs to be brought to the fore as a core value of American life.
- Our harried lifestyle. We need to make time for rest, reflection, and cultivating the inner life. We Jews have a great religious institution in our Sabbath. One day each week the truly pious turn off their cell phones, computers, and TV screens, and they retreat wholly from the commercial culture that so overwhelms us. Time is spent alone, with family, and in community. This cannot be directly copied or legislated; we have rightly rejected the “Blue Laws” approach to an American Sabbath. But there is something important to be learned and taught here: the importance of preserving and restoring our sacred sense of self and our basic human relations as they were in pre-electronic age times. Conservatives and religious progressives will have differing visions as to what those truths are, but they will need to hear and learn from one another. You might do well to create and actively head a national commission, made up of religious figures and social scientists, on how to preserve essential human values in our high-speed era. ■

Arthur Green is Irving Brudnick Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Religion and Rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College. His newest book, Radical Judaism: Hasidism for a New Era, is soon to appear from Yale University Press.

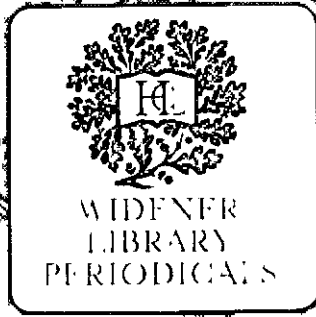
INKKUN

POLITICS+SPIRITUALITY+CULTURE

(ē-kūn) To mend, repair, and transform the world. JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2009

OUR NEW PRESIDENT

Page 17



MEMOS TO OBAMA

by Uti Avnery, Michael Beckwith, Tony Campolo, Deepak Chopra, Aryeh Cohen, John Dear, Diana L. Eck, Riane Eisler, Jodie Evans, James Forbes, Matthew Fox, Jonathan Granoff, Arthur Green, Robert Inchausti, Jerome Kagan, Catherine Keller, Jonathan Lear, Bill McKibben, Brian McLaren, Eboo Patel, Robert Pollin, Omid Safi, Alan Shapiro, William Sinkford, Robert Thurman, Sharon Welch, Jim Winkler, Hanza Yusuf, and many more.



0001710817# TIKK JAN/FEB 10 57 P3
CAMBRIDGE COLLEGE LIBRARY
100 HARVARD YARD
CAMBRIDGE MA 02138-4502

\$5.95 U.S. \$5.95 Canada



The Sacred Story of the Big Bang and Evolution
A Feminist Approach to Caring for Animals
Che On the Big Screen | End Torture Now!
Action: Oil | African Americans and Prop. 8