The Politics of Meaning
Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism
By Michael Lerner

Chapter One: Is There Really a Spiritual Crisis? And What Does It Have to Do with Politics?

It is no news to most Americans that our society is in the midst of an ethical and spiritual crisis. It manifests itself in crime and violence, the breakdown of families, the seemingly never-ending revelations of corruption in government, the spread of alcoholism and drug abuse, the destruction of our planet's ecological life-support system. Yet more and more Americans are coming to believe that these problems cannot be solved by scientific progress, nor by a new governmental program, nor by a set of earnest young technocrats with Ivy League degrees and fancy new language or advanced computer techniques. Many Americans have come to believe that the problems are deeper, more fundamental, and are rooted in the way that our society approaches reality.

The Meaning of Meaning

As a teenager I had the great fortune to make the acquaintance of one of the twentieth century's most impressive theologians, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was later to be my teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Heschel taught me that the quest for meaning is the central hunger in advanced industrial societies. What people search for, however, is not a meaning that is merely personal, but rather a meaning that transcends the "me" dimension and addresses the ultimate relevance of human being. The self is in need of a meaning which it cannot furnish by itself.

Some people dismiss questions of ultimate meaning as themselves meaningless. Basing their views on what they believe to be a more "scientific" approach to the world, they insist that only words or sentences have meaning. Any attempt to find larger meanings, they insist, are based on now-discredited metaphysical systems that could not possibly be verified by scientific knowledge. These skeptics insist that our interest in meaning is nothing more than the intellectual expression of a vague longing for wholeness or unity that. Ought not to command our respect or attention.

But such dismissals are really only pseudo-science.

Every attempt to restrict meaning in this way is itself based on a metaphysical foundation. Those who dismiss questions about ultimate meaning as meaningless are simply relying on an alternative framework of meaning whose epistemological foundation is no stronger. They have no recourse but to appeal to their own framework of meaning (for example, that the only claims which are really meaningful are those that can be verified through some form of empirical observation) or appeal to "common sense" (namely, the dominant framework of meaning in their own society).

There are others who question the desire for meaning because they think that human beings can never be motivated by a purpose higher than material self-interest. To these reductionists, the

fundamental motivating forces that drive human beings are food, sex, power, and individual or species survival. Freud used the term "id" to discuss the basic energy force in human beings; all of our higher activities, he thought, derived their energy from this id energy.

It would be pointless for me to deny the importance of our primary desires, or for that matter, to deny the importance of air, water, or any of the other essentials for physical survival. Yet those of us who are meaning-theorists focus on another key issue: understanding the distinctive and specifically human dimension of "human being." It is the desire for meaningful connection--not only to other human beings, but to a transcendent purpose in the universe--that plays the central role in shaping human reality. It is this desire for meaningful connection that characterizes the distinctively human id energy.

This desire for transcendent purpose is partially but never fully achieved in our relationships to others. Conversely, it is the frustration of that drive for meaning that helps explain much of the accumulated anger and cruelty that we see around us in daily life. We experience this frustration inside ourselves in the form of irrational angers, jealousies, hunger for power or fame, and many other seemingly inexplicable feelings that are sometimes labeled "the shadow" or dark side of human life.

There are societal and psychological obstacles to our pursuit of meaning. But meaning is neither a psychological nor a social construct; it is an ontological, metaphysical or spiritual one. Meaning cannot be fully supplied by an existential choice (as in, "I choose to make the meaning of my life the amount of power I can accumulate"), nor can it be fully supplied by service to society or humanity, though the existential choice and the service to humanity may be part of the process.

Because the search for meaning is the sine qua non of human existence, as central to the reality of what humans do as any description of our struggle for food or power, we are continually led back to the realm of the spiritual and the religious. Abraham Joshua Heschel provides us with an account of this aspect of human reality in his book, Who Is Man: "Animals are content when their needs are satisfied; humans insist not only on being satisfied but also on being able to satisfy, on being a need not simply on having needs . . . [I]t is a most significant fact that . . . life is not meaningful to us unless less serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else."

Our quest for meaning is an effort to understand human life in terms larger than the self, an attempt to find the ultimate relevance of human being. And, according to Heschel, that quest leads us quickly to discovering that human life is meaningful because human beings are called upon by the ultimate reality of the universe. To be human is to be commanded. To embody the divine spirit--to be made in the image of God--is to be a creature who has received a message and a command, to be partners with the divine in the healing and repair of this world. Or, in secular language, to be human is to recognize a categorical obligation to an objective moral task of world repair.

This book, however, is not a book about the best way to find meaning in one's personal or social life. There are a wide variety of religious and spiritual traditions, and I have no intention of arguing here for any particular approach. Though I belong to a particular faith community,

Judaism, I hope for a world in which many different faith communities, as well as those who find meaning in various secular worldviews, can live together in harmony and mutual respect.

I do not want a world in which either government or civil society forces or even subtly inculcates in us a particular approach to meaning. We have so much more to learn about building and discovering meaning. What we need now is to develop a democratic ethos of mutual tolerance and humility when it comes to public discussion of this or other ethical and spiritual issues.

I am seeking in this book to focus on the ways in which our current social and psychological condition blocks the pursuit of meaning, and on what can be done to eliminate those blocks. But it would be a deep mistake to conclude that meaning can be achieved solely through a reordering of society, or through some psychotherapy or psychic healing. The social and psychological healing that we need is only a necessary--not a sufficient--condition for satisfying our needs for meaning. The healing called for in this book is not a substitute for religions, spiritual practices, or inner caring for our souls. This is not a self-help book, but an appeal to reorganize our society as well as our personal lives to make them less an impediment to and more congruent with our highest ideals.

A Crisis of Spirit

In contemporary public life we are taught that human beings are fundamentally motivated by material self-interest, and that the physical and social worlds have no room for spiritual notions or non-material human needs. People, we are told, are fundamentally selfish. They look out for themselves and they do not really care about anyone else, except as a way to advance themselves. People want to accumulate material goods and bodily pleasures without end, and all human actions are aimed at achieving those ends.

Cynicism about ideals and other people's motives is one of the major correlates of this worldview. According to the dominant thinking of our age, those who pursue higher ideals beyond self-interest, who let ethical vision determine their life choices, must either be dissembling or deeply disturbed. In either case, the rest of us should keep our distance, because such people are either consciously trying to manipulate us or unconsciously seeking power and likely to hurt us in the process. This cynicism permeates daily life, undermining people's ability to trust others or to pursue ethical or spiritual vision, and making it extremely difficult to convey to the next generation the shared ethical values and spiritual experience of the human race.

Yet, more and more people are coming to see that this cynical way of thinking and doing things is itself irrational and self-destructive. Religions, spiritual traditions, art and literature preserve for us the collective memory of a different way of ordering the world, a way that validated our desire for community, human connection, mutual recognition, and a sense of higher purpose to our life. Although most of what we are taught in this society leads us to dismiss all of this spiritual heritage as irrational and outdated, many people intuitively know that a world that has been stripped of these dimensions is a poorer, less fulfilling place.

Unconsciously, we lament the disenchantment of the world and the reduction of our experience to forms that fit contemporary materialism and selfishness. Many people intuit that treating the world and other human beings as resources to be exploited may lead Western societies to the

brink of social and ecological disaster. If we continue to tolerate this way of thinking in our public lives, it is not because we believe that things are going well in the larger society, but because we have come to believe that we are too powerless to change anything as large as the dominant way things are done.

No wonder, then, that many Americans have fought to preserve a private sphere in their personal lives where they can retain a very different sense of what is real and what is important. Some of those who describe themselves as conservative are really people who wish to protect themselves from more government, because they see government as the wedge that introduces this materialism and selfishness into public life. Part of what these conservatives are trying to protect themselves from is the dominant paradigm of materialism and self-interest which has such disastrous consequences in public life.

Many liberals write these people off, but those who wish to create a progressive politics of meaning understand that many conservatives share with us a profound distaste for the alienation that permeates our society. Some conservatives imagine that if they can get away from the public realm, they might be able to preserve a personal life that offers a more humane way of relating to other human beings. Sophisticated liberals who ridicule the conservative nostalgia for an earlier America may be correct to note its evocation of highly romanticized visions of the past--visions that obscure the real class divisions, the racism, and the sexism of the small towns whose demise conservatives bemoan. But such liberals miss the quite legitimate desire underlying this romanticization: a desire for a less alienating world in which selfishness and materialism would not rule the day.

Yet attempts to find greater humanity by escaping from the alienation of the larger society can themselves become new sources of alienation. Our focus on personal fulfillment leads some of us to turn our backs on the plight of the less fortunate and to see them as the problem that must be escaped. People build gated communities in suburbia, hoping to keep out all that has become inhumane and destructive in our larger society. But these gates also sever our connections with other, often poorer, people. Hoping to escape crime, many of us symbolically shut the gates on that part of ourselves that once responded to the plight of others. The very act of shutting ourselves off from others mimics the inhumanity of the larger society that we have sought to escape.

In our personal lives, we know that human beings are not isolated, independent creatures whose sole concern is to improve their own material comforts. We understand that we all exist in relationships with others, and that relationship is fundamental to what it means to be human. We were born in physical connection to our mother, and survived because of the care given to us by our biological parents or other caring adults. It was this caring that sustained us. Every human being is born with an intrinsic need for recognition from others, and it is in and through this recognition that we become ourselves. We desire a spiritually deep and emotionally real connection based on a recognition of who we are (not only as unique beings, but as beings who share a common tie to the spiritual reality of the universe).

Unfortunately, the people who surround us, beginning with our parents, are often so emotionally buried within their own painful lives that it is hard for them to see us clearly. All too often, the recognition that they give us depends on our willingness and ability to perform within their

predetermined categories, responding to their needs for us to fit their already existing picture of the world.

These early experiences begin a long process of encounters with others in which we are continually being forced to develop a false self and to deny our own deep need for recognition, in order to achieve the forms of pseudo-recognition that are more readily available. In the words of psychologist Peter Gabel, we are "systematically misrecognized": first by parents, then by teachers, and ultimately by most of the others whom we meet in daily life. We encounter these others through a false self developed out of despair that our real self will never be recognized or confirmed. We are surrounded by a world filled with people who are desperate to be recognized, yet who simultaneously accept a depressive stance in which they imagine that no one will ever really see them as they are. They have come to believe that their own isolation or loneliness is the "reality" to which they must adjust. It is this psychological dynamic that underlies our willingness to deaden ourselves to our world and give rote compliance to its demands.

The most fundamental demand of the contemporary world is that we give up our ethical and spiritual sensitivity, or at least marginalize those sensitivities by keeping them out of the so-called real world. We first learn to do this in our families. Here we learn to re press our intuition that something is deeply wrong with the way we are being misrecognized and encouraged to develop a false self. Most significantly, we continue learning to be ethically unconscious in schools, where we learn to separate "knowledge" from our own ethical and spiritual intuitions (the latter often dismissed as "merely subjective"). We spend twelve years submitting ourselves to supposedly objective criteria, learning to jump through endless hoops that define intelligence and competence in ways that separate them from ethical and spiritual awareness. When we graduate from high school, we are prepared to function in a world that is deeply cynical about the possibility of relationships that are loving and caring.

All this "learning" must be unlearned if we are to reconnect with the deepest truths of the human experience. Recognizing ourselves as spiritually and emotionally connected--to one another and to some transcendent aspect of existence--and understanding these connections as fundamental, are not new ideas. They emerge from the experience of the human race through most of history. They are part of the common wisdom of many indigenous peoples and form the basis of many of the world's religious traditions. Yet in the past few hundred years, this knowledge of spiritual and ethical truth--this fundamental need that we have, to recognize and be recognized as beings who embody this higher energy and who fundamentally deserve respect and caring--has been excluded from our public lives and has been under assault even in our private eves.

The rise of market societies in the West has produced a dominant <u>worldview</u> that ridicules spiritual and ethical realities, insisting that there is nothing more important than material self-interest. Love is reduced to sexual gratification plus a desire for protection, or for mutual economic or political interest. Friendship is seen as a temporary opportunity for mutual self-advancement. Ethics is dismissed as an attempt to dress up personal preferences or group interests, and impose them on others. Spirituality is seen as an escape route for people who are too mushy-headed to face reality.

Ironically, this materialist outlook was originally considered to be liberating, and it probably was. The new emphasis on the lone individual was an important advance, because it freed people

from coercive communities that used the language of ethical and spiritual awareness, of community and caring, in order to force people to conform and submit to domination and inequality. Though individualism today has taken extreme and destructive forms, it has served in the past as a very important counterweight to a wide variety of oppressive religious communities that have lost their connection to the spiritual truths they claimed to embody.

Up until about four hundred years ago, most people in the West lived in traditional or feudal societies dominated by ruling elites, usually allied with the Roman Catholic Church. Whenever anybody challenged the existing patriarchal system, with its stratified, unequal distribution of wealth and power, he or she was told that the way things were had been sanctified by God--and how dare this person challenge the spiritual and ethical order of the world? It is not surprising that many people eventually rebelled against this hierarchical framework.

Leading the rebellion were the merchants, traders, shopkeepers, bankers, and independent professionals of the social middle class (collectively referred to as "the bourgeoisie"), who felt most resentful of the older feudal order. These people resented the degree to which the church had set limits on their own economic activities. For example, the church often set a "fair price," a "fair profit," and a "fair wage" in ways that impeded the creation of a free market. The traders and shopkeepers did not want the larger society to limit the profits they could make or to demand that they be responsible for the well-being of their workers. So the bourgeoisie began to challenge the very notion of a spiritual or ethical order.

It was not difficult for the bourgeoisie to win support among the populace. For many centuries, the language of spirituality and ethics had been a cover for the selfishness and materialism of feudal lords and ladies, who danced in chivalric splendor while the vast majority of the population struggled to feed themselves from that part of their harvest not paid to the lord of the estate.

The newly emerging middle classes jettisoned the language of spirituality and ethics--and replaced it with a new theory of reality and a new theory of knowledge.

What was real, these merchants argued, was that which could be presented to the senses and actually touched, tasted, seen, or experienced through our physical bodies. Anything that could not be presented to the senses for verification, such as any belief in a spiritual realm or in an afterlife, was literally "non-sense." So total was the eventual victory of this new way of looking at the world, that today the word "nonsense" has come to mean "having no foundation and hence no claim on our attention."

This revolutionary argument was grounded in two presuppositions. First, the new middle class spoke, quite appropriately, about the importance of a this-worldly focus. But such a focus did not necessarily exclude spiritual reality (indeed, from my standpoint, it is precisely in this world and on this earth-plane that we so desperately need to reconnect to the spiritual dimension of reality). Second, the argument assumed that reality consisted only of that which could be observed through the senses. That assumption excluded the possibility of spiritual and ethical reality. The philosophical heirs of this new way of looking at reality (often referred to as "empiricism," a view that insists that all that can be known must be related in complex ways to our experience of the world) found themselves reducing ethical judgments to nothing more than personal feelings.

Why did the empiricist view catch on? For two reasons: first, it responded to people's anger toward feudal and religious systems that had been using spirituality and moral judgments to subjugate them. By the late medieval period, there was growing recognition of the corruptness of a church that accumulated riches for itself while ignoring the plight of the poor, and of a feudal aristocracy that was morally obtuse and ruthless in its attempts to keep power. There was growing frustration with the conventional moral wisdom that urged people to stay in their preordained social positions and never try to better themselves. If moral and spiritual language had led to this kind of a world, many people reasoned, then perhaps it was time to reject that whole way of thinking.

Second, the traders and shopkeepers meanwhile had been able to bring better living and greater material abundance to some, and they promised much more once all constraints were removed. Indeed, they promised a world in which, once the feudal aristocracy was abandoned and the church taken out of public life, everyone would have an equal opportunity to advance, to change his or her position in life, and to acquire all the material wealth he or she desired.

If the defenders of spirituality and ethics had been perceived to be seriously committed to love, caring, spiritual sensitivity, and moral vitality, the battle for the primacy of sense data would have taken much longer. It was not the case that people had tasted a genuinely spiritual and ethical order and then rejected it in favor of a preference for material satisfaction. Rather, by the middle of the eighteenth century, growing numbers of people felt that the language of spirituality and ethics had indeed proved "meaningless," because little in their experience gave it any meaning. As a result, there was a growing tendency to dismiss as "nonsense" many of the spiritual vocabularies of the past.

A materialist worldview emerged that validated only that which could be experienced by the senses. And in place of any ethical concerns of the community, this new social order insisted that the ultimate reality was the pleasure and satisfaction of each individual. The lone individual became the center of the universe, and if we built families or communities, it was only because the lone individual had found it in his or her interest to do so. All connections between human beings hereafter would be based on contract: free individuals choosing to make a connection with others. The sole goal of the state, in this scheme, was to ensure that there was a realm of free contracts in which no one would interfere.

Marxist historians who correctly note the aspects of class struggle in the rise of capitalism usually miss the crucial dimension of meaning. In its historical context, the rejection of patriarchal, hierarchical, and oppressive communities of meaning was actually an affirmation of our needs for meaning. It was a radical attempt to subvert the existing official system of meaning, which had been perceived as a total sham.

The new order lionized the individual and taught that our individual happiness and fulfillment was to be the ultimate criterion of value, quite apart from our connection to others. However, it is clear to me that the more we see ourselves and our fates as separate from our fellow human beings, the more difficult it becomes to sustain the belief that our individual lives have ultimate meaning or purpose.

Paradoxically, the Marxists and other leftists who attacked the absence of social justice in the bourgeois world nevertheless bought into its epistemology and ontology. They constructed a narrow view of human liberation based on class struggle because the only human needs that they thought could be frustrated in the contemporary world were those material economic needs or individual autonomy needs that were presumed by a rigidly empiricist social science. So both the bourgeois and those who claimed to be revolutionaries effectively agreed on a way of looking at reality that ignored the dimension of meaning.

The Denial of Meaning: Spiritual Impoverishment

Marxists used to say that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is its inability to provide for the material needs of the working class. From my standpoint, however, the critical contradiction is not the economic but rather the spiritual and ethical impoverishment caused by the prevailing organization of society. Middle-income Americans today have far more material goods and economic benefits than we had in the past, but we feel less secure, less connected, and less fulfilled. We feel far more vulnerable to economic danger because we recognize that we can count less on one another to help out when times get rough. Ripped from the network of connectedness, unable to see the ways in which we need one another, assured that our only hope lies in fostering our interests even at the expense of everyone else, we perceive ourselves as alone and desperate to hang on to whatever flimsy reeds of connection remain.

We live in a society that encourages us to treat one another as means to achieve our own personal satisfaction, and rewards us for our ability to accumulate wealth and power over others. Not surprisingly, we find ourselves surrounded by people who are self-absorbed and indifferent to our well-being. Far from producing happiness, our society universalizes cultural and psychological misery, because people actually do need one another, not just when we can get something out of being there. Living in this society--in which we are deprived of mutual recognition, in which loving relationships and trusting friendships are increasingly difficult to sustain, in which the idea of caring about others seems increasingly utopian, and in which it is rare to find work that contributes to the common good--can be just as painful as living in a society without adequate food or shelter.

The loss of meaning causes deep pain. Yet we are surrounded by media and other interpreters of public values and social norms who not only deny the possibility of meaning, but also insist that we hide this kind of pain from ourselves and one another.

On the one hand, we are encouraged to interpret our pain as a personal problem, one that we have brought on ourselves by not being more psychologically healthy. The disintegration of trust and connection among people, the instability in families and friendships, the sense that people are out only for themselves, and the feeling that our work serves no higher purpose and is thus frustrating and alienating--all are experienced as personal problems.

The psychologically healthier among us are able to acknowledge to ourselves some of this unhappiness, even though we have no social categories that help us understand our problem as anything more than a personal defect. So we rush off to psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, marriage and family counselors, spiritual healers, seminar leaders, growth groups, astrologers, soothsayers, and anyone else who promises to fix our personal problem with good

advice or experiential learning. And in fact, although these various healing activities are predicated on the assumption that our problem is merely personal and subjective, they often do help. Why? Because the actual process of being able to discuss our "private" issues with someone else, and the experience of being listened to and cared about, provide us with human contact and connection that partially satisfy our deep need for connection to others. Though this is only one aspect of the crisis of meaning it is often the one in which the crisis is most immediately apparent in our lives.

When tens of millions of people are in internal pain, deeply involved in self-blame, and unable to understand the social realities that have caused, contributed to, or exacerbated that pain, a series of social crises is likely to emerge. People will act out their inner Špain in a wide variety of ways, depending on their own experiences as children, their own psychological makeup, their economic situation, their cultural assumptions, and the support mechanisms available to them. Some will become deeply depressed, withdrawing energy from their lives and feeling despair about ever achieving anything that makes any sense. Others will become deeply angry, approaching all of life's tasks with resentment or bitterness that sours their relationships with others. Still others will act out in more socially destructive ways: divorce or rapid disintegration of friendships and loyalties, drug or alcohol abuse, sexual abuse in families, drive-by shootings, and other seemingly incomprehensible acts of violence or cruelty.

While the crisis of meaning is typically ruled out of public discussion, its consequences in these publicly observable social crises cannot be ignored. But to keep ourselves from knowing the relationship of these problems to any deeper underlying social crisis, our society insists that the problems be analyzed and dealt with in isolation from one another. We therefore will pour millions of dollars into research to see what genetic factors might predispose someone to crime or to drug or alcohol abuse. But we will not ask, "What are people trying to escape when they deaden their consciousness through drugs or alcohol?" This kind of a question would open the gates for a more systematic critique of society than the proponents of this research care to take on.

Similarly, while we will pour billions of dollars into building more jails and putting more police on the streets, we are afraid to face honestly the breakdown of human connections, the dissolution of moral and spiritual bonds, and the resulting pain and inner frustrations that have engendered the escalation of violence and crime in Western societies.