

# Staying Fired Up

## Antidotes for Activist Burnout

Letty Cottin Pogrebin



**L**ike many progressives, I sometimes delude myself into thinking I know exactly what must be done and how to do it. There's a problem? There's a need? It's simple: We'll just call a meeting, invite the best people, build a coalition, get thinkers to think, writers to write, funders to fund, organizers to organize—and before you know it, the problem will be solved, the need will be fulfilled, and the world will be transformed.

But you and I know that it's not so simple. Inevitably something happens to complicate matters. Someone

throws a monkey-wrench into the proceedings, there's a clash of egos or an ideological schism. The issues get muddied, the opposition gears up, our troops slow down, and *tikkun olam* is postponed another month or year or decade.

Emerson said we are what we think about all day. If that is true, I must be a schizophrenic, because my thoughts on this topic are always swinging like a pendulum between optimism and pessimism. One day I see the *building* blocks for a just and caring society, the next day I fixate on the *stumbling* blocks that obstruct the path to social change. Tonight, I want to focus on just one of those stumbling blocks, activist's battle-fatigue—otherwise known as burnout—because the diminution of our troops so often is what prevents us from moving forward.

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*Letty Cottin Pogrebin is a founding editor of Ms. magazine and the author of seven books, most recently, Deborah, Golda and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America (Anchor paperback). This article is adapted from a speech presented at the TIKKUN Conference, January 1994, at which the author received TIKKUN's award for healing and repairing the world.*



Burnout is the reason people say no when we ask for their time, their name, their labor, or support. Burnout explains why some dip in and out of liberation movements and others have given up on collective action altogether, no longer believing change is possible. Before long one individual after another becomes exhausted or disillusioned, then one group after another shrinks and eventually disbands, and finally, what was a movement dissipates into separate people nursing their separate dreams and disappointments, their energy lost to the liberal community which is only as strong and vibrant as its rank and file.

Burnout comes up all the time in my reader mail and at my lectures. People suffering from political battle fatigue ask questions like, "After twenty-five years of struggle, how do you keep the passion in your politics? How do you protect against cynicism? What keeps you going?"

Or they say: "I feel deeply about—fill in the blank: Bosnia, gay and lesbian rights, Jewish education, fighting racism and anti-Semitism, welfare reform—but moving the issue is such a battle and every minor advance takes so long that I'm ready to give up. I don't have the strength for another round of protests. I'm tired of the infighting. I can't stand explaining the basics over and over again to every new listener. I'm sick of arguing with my friends. I'm tired of being the resident radical or the town trouble-maker. I feel stigmatized. I feel defeated. I feel alone."

People who say such things are neither gratuitous whiners nor martyrs looking for medals. They're just worn out by the hard work of social change. Maybe nobody warned them that the struggle would be this arduous, its fruits so meager, its time lines so protracted. Maybe they are strangers to the dynamics of political change, or the lessons of past social movements or the prospects for a politics of meaning. Maybe they're too impatient, or thin-skinned, or naive. Whatever the explanation, the problem they describe is real, painful, and often ignored by leftists who are too busy trying to move forward to notice how many have dropped out along the way.

In the last couple of decades, several brigades of seasoned activists have come and gone. Just look at the Jewish world. Whatever happened to the folks in Breira, the multitudes who identified with the New Jewish Agenda in its heyday, the crowds who turned up at past Jewish feminist conferences here and in Israel, the Jews who demonstrated against the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, or marched for organized labor, civil rights, women's equality, and gay rights? Where are the stalwart forces who first

supported Women in Black, or The Shalom Center, or Jews for Racial and Economic Justice; the huge audiences that turned up to hear Amos Oz or Alice Shalvi, Avrum Burg or Shulamit Aloni, the thousands who at various times have affiliated with the pro-peace politics of American Jewish Congress, International Center for Peace in the Middle East, New Israel Fund, and Americans for Peace Now?

If all these progressives had banded together and stayed on board for the long haul, our movement would be unstoppable, and instead of dealing with an overflow crowd at Columbia University, TIKKUN would have had to hold this conference in Madison Square Garden.

So I put the problem to you bluntly: Why haven't we retained a critical mass of experienced social justice advocates? And how do we inoculate one another against losing heart and losing hope?

**I** have no easy answers, only those that have worked for me during a quarter of a century in the movements for women's equality, Jewish feminism, and Middle East peace.

As I see it, there are three major causes of burnout—backlash, backsliding, and backbiting.

What we call backlash, of course, is the invidious, often invisible, countervailing response to any serious effort to challenge the status quo. Our first protection against the pain of backlash is to accept that a reaction from one's adversaries is inevitable. When you disturb the comforts and privileges of the dominant class, you cannot expect them to roll over and play dead. The next step is to decode the particular backlash and analyze how it is taking root and spreading, lest it seem to be a natural or evolutionary socio-political response rather than a well-choreographed crusade by special interests who can be neutralized or offset.

To understand the anatomy of a backlash, read Susan Faludi's book of the same name in which she deconstructs the campaigns of co-optation, defamation, and disinformation that characterized the 1980s war against American women. The book explains how political conservatives, corporate interests, media, and certain strata of American men mobilized against the progress made by women during the 1970s, specifically how these reactionary interests tried to vilify feminists and delegitimize the organized women's movement in order to silence our continuing challenge to male supremacy and patriarchal norms.

But even with an understanding of the machinations of backlash, I've found I need an



emotional shield, a way to trick my psyche into transmuting backlash reactions into nourishment for further struggle. I do this by taking the virulence of the opposition as a clear measure of the success of my cause. In other words, the harder they fight, the better we must be doing.

For example, since the handshake on the White House lawn on September 13, there has been a growing backlash against the peace process. Driven by their failure at the Israeli polls in 1992 and the success of the Oslo negotiations last summer, Israel's right-wing parties have grown desperate in their attempts to fan security fears, arouse settler violence, and play the treason card against those who support Yitzhak Rabin. Most recently, they have stooped so low as to suggest that future Israeli governments will not feel bound to honor agreements reached by the Rabin government.

As an Americans for Peace Now activist, I gauge the effectiveness of our sisters and brothers at Shalom Achshav in Israel by the extent of the hysteria of the Jewish Right.

Likewise, in the United States, I take the Jewish Right's attack as evidence of the perceived power of the Labor-Meretz-Peace Now position. This is not to say I welcome the recent escalation of belligerence in the American Jewish community. I'm not happy about the Times Square demonstration by World Committee for Israel at which fanatics called Rabin and Peres liars and traitors. I'm not happy about the hate mail, harassment, and defamation of peace advocates with invectives like "sell-out," "enemy of Israel," "murderer," even "Hitler." Such inflammatory speech *by Jews against Jews* raises the threshold of hostility and creates a climate in which extremists feel free to resort to violence, whether that means throwing eggs and tomatoes at Israeli Ambassador Itamar Rabinovitch, shouting death threats at Israeli Consul-General Colette Avital, planting bombs outside the offices of Americans for Peace Now and



the New Israel Fund, or training American Jewish volunteers in guerrilla warfare, a bit of surrealism in everyday life that was documented on "60 Minutes" in a piece on the fringe group Kahane Chai.

Some leaders of the organized Jewish community responded to these developments with silence, others with ambiguous press releases that seemed motivated more by concern about respectable Jews being embarrassed in the eyes of non-Jews than outrage on behalf of those who were in danger or a desire to issue a clear and forceful condemnation of violence. I couldn't help but wonder what the mainstream leaders would have done had a bomb been left outside 110 East 59 Street where the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations have their offices.

Violence infuriates me but backlash feeds me like a tonic. It tells me that pro-peace views are proliferating and our groups have become a perceived threat to the reactionary forces. It tells me where the vulnerabilities are on the other side, and where our side has to strengthen its message and improve its outreach. It assures me of the importance of our continued support for Israel's effort to negotiate a



comprehensive peace with security, and the urgent need for Americans for Peace Now, New Israel Fund, TIKKUN, and others to educate a wider spectrum of the Jewish and general community on issues of peace, Israeli democracy, and Jewish Arab co-existence.

**T**he second major cause of burnout is backsliding, a term that describes the nasty tendency of legal, social, and economic progress to follow a zig-zag pattern, lurching two steps forward and one step back. After years spent working to change a policy, pass a law, or win a case, some people can't stand the fact that victories never stay won, and problems never stay solved. Such people, well-meaning though they are, drop out of the struggle because they cannot accept the frustration of refighting the same battles over and over again in one lifetime.

Progress and backsliding are the Siamese twins of dialectical politics. We've never had one without the other, and unless we program cycles of regression and redeployment into our plans, we are doomed to despair. But then, the same is true in reverse for our opponents: Our victories are their defeats and cause for *their* mobilization and retrenchment, which is all the more reason why we cannot afford to sustain losses in our ranks.

When our enemies are in charge, we can fight retrogression with an all-out attack. But what do we do when we find ourselves backsliding or standing still and it is our friends who are at the helm?

A case in point: After the 1992 elections in the United States and Israel, American Jews who had spent twelve years in opposition to the right-wing governments of Reagan, Bush, Begin, Shamir and company, suddenly faced a new challenge: We were grateful for the new leadership in both countries but almost immediately, both Bill Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin fell short of our expectations.

Some purists threw up their hands and called it quits. Others of us believed this was our moment of truth. We helped elect this Democratic president, however moderate, and this Democratically controlled Congress; and our counterpart groups in Israel helped elect the Labor coalition. Now we must step up to the plate and play our proper role—as innovator, lobbyist, conscience, goad—for now, as opposed to *then*, there is a realistic possibility that our influence will be heeded. This is no time for purists to drop out. When we witness backsliding among our own, our challenge is to criticize policies with which we disagree without destroying the people who espouse them.

We are the cutting edge; we are most useful to

society when we push the envelope at the left end of the spectrum, so there is more safe space for the center to move in our direction. While conventional centrists hop on the bandwagon of those in power, grateful to be liberated from Republicans or Likudniks, happy to get some relief from the likes of Pat Robertson or Geulah Cohen, it is our job to remind elected officials of their campaign promises and to impose accountability upon the politics of friendship.

I learned to expect the lacerations of backsliding early in the game. When I first discovered feminism and read its Ur-texts—its original position papers, which were printed on mimeograph machines and circulated hand to hand—I was bowled over by the sheer logic of their arguments. It was 1969 and I was a publishing executive at the time. If the radical “women’s libbers” could convert me from a relatively comfortable token woman into a proselytizing feminist, surely this call for gender justice would be answered quickly by millions of others and the world would change...say by 1972, or 1975 at the latest. All we had to do, I thought, was spread the word so that it reaches every oppressed woman and reasonable man in America.

Of course, 1972 and 1975 came and went, and the years rolled on. We won a few big sex discrimination lawsuits, then lost the Equal Rights Amendment, won some seats in the Congress and state legislatures, then lost our first major party vice-presidential nominee. We won some sexual harassment cases, then lost the fight against Clarence Thomas. I can only be grateful that somewhere along the way, I realized that I would be in this struggle for the rest of my life.

*Tikkun olam* is not a finite job like fixing a leaky faucet. It is not something we finish once and for all, like reading a novel or giving birth. *Tikkun olam* is something we work at day after day, year after year, regardless of our win/loss record. We do it because we are human, and our purpose in this life is to perfect the social order, and yes, repair the world.

By repair, I mean help fix what is broken but also *re-pair* that which has been torn asunder; to heal divisions, to reconnect people to their environment, to their own spiritual selves, to each other. The work of re-pairing the world creates harmony where there was conflict, belonging where there was alienation. It re-unites the disparate, the opposite, the Other; it *pairs* male and female, body and soul, prayer and acts, humanity and God.

The endlessness of this work is the most predictable thing about it. Which is why we must make the

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inevitability of backsliding an entry-level epiphany for every social activist who comes into the fold. No one should expect miracles. Two steps forward, one step back is the best we can hope for most of the time. And it *does* produce progress after all.

**T**he third major cause of burnout is backbiting—a hazard familiar to anyone who has ever worked in a group. Burnout results when good people get sick of bad things being said about them. You know what happens: Say there is some controversy in the group about a particular political strategy. Instead of arguing for your position openly and trying to persuade others on the merits, you denigrate your opponents behind their backs, diminish their opinion, role, or status in the group, or turn others against them with some unrelated intrigue or libel. Or suppose you've set your sights on a leadership role in the group. Instead of taking on tasks that will demonstrate your abilities, you expend your energies bad-mouthing the current leaders and other likely contenders for the job; you circumvent them, organize little cabals against them, or otherwise inflict wounds you mean to be fatal.

Anyone with experience in corporations, armies, political parties, or families has known the backbiting phenomenon, but its corrosiveness tends to be exacerbated in progressive organizations. This is because our groups are pledged to critique power relations and thus are full of liberals who cannot own up to their retrograde urge toward conquest and domination.

The result is a double bind: As a movement, we decry our powerlessness in the larger political sphere and baldly seek the authority that would allow us to effect change, while in our interpersonal relations, we are in denial about the seductions and uses of power, about our rage toward those who have it, and our desire to dominate others or have the last word in decision-making.

I think it essential that progressive organizations place the subject of power high on the agenda for internal discussion. No issue is more common to all of us than the fundamental questions of how we relate to one another, how we assemble authority structures, provide access routes to leadership, and resolve conflict when it arises within the group. Perhaps if we were more honest about our individual power needs and more up-front about the way that leftist hierarchies frustrate these needs, people would resort

to backbiting far less often.

In the absence of more candor about the complexities of power, we can try to curb backbiting through moral suasion. Since most of us do our social action work under the banner of our Jewish identity, we could agree to subscribe voluntarily to the Judaic prohibition against *lashon hara*—the evil tongue. Under Jewish law, *lashon hara*, or malicious gossip, is a capital crime that is said to kill three people: the one who speaks evil, the one who hears it, and the one about whom it is said.

Even secular activists who do not feel the weight of this halachic proscription can acknowledge its essential wisdom and can pledge to banish backbiting from their conduct. Furthermore, it will encourage our best behavior if the groups we belong to would, in some public setting or by some social contract, establish their intolerance of *lashon hara*, to eradicate the one-on-one slander that drives people away.

**I**'ve offered a few suggestions to avoid burnout but I am still confounded by other problems, such as how to find time to do political work in the press of everyday life (a particularly acute problem for women activists who have primary responsibility for their homes and children); or, how to say no when I'm overextended, if I'm also aware that the hard-working organizer on the other end of the phone desperately wants to hear yes—and I know just how she or he feels; or how to affiliate appropriately when it's impossible to join every group working on an issue I care about; or how to offer "help" without condescending or infantilizing the recipient.

If you have answers to these questions, send them to TIKKUN. In the meantime, I hope that you will give some serious thought to the problems of backlash, backsliding, and backbiting. I did not set out to write a speech anchored by alliteration but if the memory experts are correct, the preponderance of "B" words in these remarks might help you recall them three months from now. What interests me more though, is what we do tomorrow and the next day to prevent burnout or cynicism from claiming some of our best people—people like you, who have come to share in this ceremony tonight.

In baseball, they say it's not over 'til it's over. In *tikkun olam*, it's not over until the Messiah comes. And until the Messiah comes, all we have is each other. So, please don't ever give up. Stay the course for the good of us all. As Marshall Meyer would have put it, every one of you can make a difference. And you must! □