

PHR-Israel's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event, September 27, 2013

Address by Dr. Ruchama Marton,  
Founder and President of PHR-Israel,

Hi all and thank you for coming to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of PHR-Israel.

What I'd like most to do is to settle some accounts and mention achievements and failures, but that's not what I am going to do.

**Today I would like to ask questions, big questions. What is our greatest challenge today? What are we today? The concept of human rights, which was right, innovative and courageous for the 1980s – what does it mean today? What will it mean tomorrow?**

Today we have a large, "satiated" organization, with a significant budget, an office, salaries, work plans, routine work methods. All is well, but how do we restore the organization's sense of urgency, of emergency, that existed at its inception?

This is the great challenge. The greatest challenge.

At the outset, our most important force was the **struggle**. An organization member was someone for whom the struggle burned in his or her bones, out of a sense of urgency, emergency. This was the important criterion for selecting staff, much more than skills or diplomas.

Whoever does not have the burning in his or her bones, whoever does not feel the urgency, should do his or her own soul-searching about what he or she is doing here. The reason is that those who do not feel the need for struggle are the fat, the cholesterol of the organization. I believe there are some of these among us, here and now, including some who do their work well. This is the stagnation that may bring about our disappearance.

True, it is hard to maintain a sense of urgency for years, but it is imperative. It is essential that this sense exist all the time. Despite the huge amount of experience we have accrued, despite the

routines that enable our work to be carried out, we must think how to restore two burning issues: the feeling of urgency and the flame of the struggle. We must ask: Is what we do a struggle, or is it work?

**The struggle is always both for something or someone - who we are with - and against something or someone.**

When we started our activity, the Occupation was at the core of the emergency, the thing against which we struggled. Today, the normalization of the occupation has turn into normalization of the emergency. Therefore today we must identify the emergency of the present, of today. In other words, what is today's real emergency? Only if we know what it is, as we understand it, will we know how to direct our struggle against it.

Our emergency does not identify with or even resemble the government's emergency. It is not the war against Iran, the war against Syria and certainly not the war against the Palestinians. We do not accept the government's emergency. On the contrary – not only do we not accept it - we struggle against it, against what the government defines as emergency.

Emergency is not about disclosing and telling everyone who it is that suffers from violence, but rather about exposing the **perpetrator** of suffering, that is, the root of the evil. There, at the root of evil, lies our struggle. That is our radicalism.

Government invents and establishes emergency laws and imposes them on all its subjects. We undertake, sometimes successfully, not to obey the government's emergency laws. We are constantly trying to encroach upon the boundaries of the law.

We must and should remember that in the beginning, the organization operated explicitly against the law. We put forth the demand for Palestinian **human rights**, in opposition to the government's war against the Palestinians during the first Intifada. We undertook to constantly push the limits of the law, in various ways, because that was the meaning of our emergency. Some of what happened and is happening in Israel is a result of the

organization's struggle against torture, against the roadblocks and yes, against the Occupation of those days.

We did expose names of physicians who operated in the government's interest rather than in the interest of prisoner patients. This was in contradiction of the laws of the Israeli Medical Association. The struggle is vis-à-vis the law, not necessarily against it. It is our job to be a thorn in the side of the government, not its mollifying aspirin. And indeed, we have been a thorn in the government's side. In the words of the Chairman of the Israeli Medical Association: "The work of PHR-Israel is fertile ground for anti-Semitism, for anti-Zionism and against the state of Israel." Thank you, dear Mr. Chairman.

So what is today's emergency? Emergency as PHR-Israel understands it?

Today's emergency is to start treating our space as one space, as we recognize the existence of segregation and apartheid. This is the struggle we should choose, not that which the government dictates us – such as how many people may exit sealed Gaza. I do not mean, of course, that we should close our eyes or stop our activity against the closure of Gaza, but the focus of our understanding and struggle should shift from the struggle against the Occupation as such to the struggle against segregation and apartheid.

We should not struggle for equality in its superficial sense, that is, for medical services of equal value to be provided where they do not exist. We should expose inequality, and, to be more precise, emphasize that inequality is the overall policy.

We ask ourselves: is our dream a liberal or radical one? We must not participate in the liberal dream that makes human rights yet another product of equality.

Foucault said that politics means changing the words. For us this means a shift from Occupation to segregation and apartheid. Because the Occupation itself has undergone a transformation, has been normalized and transformed to segregation that exists

everywhere, in every social segment: in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Negev, among the Bedouin whose homes are being demolished, refugees who are being jailed and deported, migrant workers who are slaves, and Palestinian citizens of Israel.

All of these are part of the same story; they all exist in the same space, in one territorial unit. Since today the Occupation itself is one of the instruments that serve segregation and apartheid.

We know this segregation through our daily work with the populations I mentioned. For about half of the years of our existence, we have been involved in this activity. The point is to see not only the pain and the suffering, but also -- and primarily -- the government pattern, the overall policy of segregation in the Palestinian Occupied Territory and in the state of Israel.

So, the open-ended questions I would like to put forth to you are:

How do we restore the sense of emergency that existed at our inception (as opposed to today's routine)?

What do we want to be? Are we an organization of emergency and struggle, or one that works only at field level – providing medical assistance, exams, transfer of patients and such?

What is today's dream?

What is our struggle, the struggle of today and tomorrow?

With heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated staff, board, PHR-I and last but not least our volunteers.

Ruchama.

