

An interview by Alon Mizrahi, September 12 2017

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War crimes and open wounds: The physician who took on Israeli segregation

On the occasion of her 80th birthday, Ruchama Marton, the founder of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, talks about the atrocities she witnessed as a soldier, the enduring power of feminism, and why only outside help has a chance of ending Israel's military rule over the Palestinians.

By Alon Mizrahi



Dr. Ruchama Marton in her home in Tel Aviv. (Shiraz Grinbaum/Activestills.org)

Ruchama Marton belongs to what you might call Generation 1.5 of Israel's anti-occupation activists. She was slightly too young to belong to the small and avant-garde group that established the revolutionary socialist organization Matzpen in the 1960s, but old enough to have taken classes with firebrand Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz in Jerusalem. There, while at medical school, she revolutionized the admissions process for female students, leading to the abolishing of admissions quotas. And when she discovered there as ban on women wearing trousers at the medical faculty, she revolted against that as well.

Marton founded Physicians for Human Rights-Israel during the First Intifada, bringing the term "human rights" into the Israeli political discourse. Born in Israel, where she has lived her whole life, she has been an active psychiatrist for more than 40 years. Her relationship with this place is complicated and painful, almost impossible.

Marton minces no words when it comes to the leftist and peace organizations, which she sees as a kind of "humane society," seeing little point in activism that does not directly confront the violation of human rights, the core of which are *political* rights. She has been outraged by injustice and segregation her whole life. Between fighting chauvinism and patriarchy, and the lifelong struggle against the occupation, she refuses to be silent.

I met Marton for a talk in her Tel Aviv home in honor of her 80th birthday. I assumed she wouldn't make it easy for me. I was right.

As a psychiatrist with years of experience, I want to start with what I think is the big question. Why are we so obsessively attached to dehumanizing Arabs? Why does it seem as if the greatest desire of this place is to deny the Palestinians any kind of recognition and legitimacy? After all there is no practical purpose for that at this point, we've already won.

"What do you mean it doesn't serve a practical purpose? That's nonsense. It serves all of the Zionist interests. Each and every one."

Explain.

President's Speech

"First of all, we are colonialists. Zionism is colonialist. And the first thing a good colonialist does is dispossess. Dispossess of what? Of anything he can. Of what is important, of what serves him. Of land. Of natural resources. And, of course, of humanity. After all, it is obvious that in order to control someone else you have to take away their humanity."

But hasn't that project ended? It's not as if we are in a war now and are about to conquer new territory. The War of Independence ended long ago. We won. We have already drawn borders. Why do we still need that mentality?

"What borders? There are no borders, there will be no borders, and I don't see that there is any intention to draw them now. But beyond that, dispossession is an unending task. Those occupied people, those dispossessed people, whether they are inside the Green Line or outside of it, they do not agree. They do not give up. They don't agree to be dispossessed of their land, of their water, of their humanity. As Hannah Arendt said: without political rights there is no human being. Political rights come before everything else. Before the right to property, movement, assembly. Those are all very nice but they are secondary. Without political rights, everything you do is charity. Without political rights, there is nothing."



Physicians for Human Rights volunteers provide first aid on the Israel-Egypt border. (Oren Ziv/Activestills.org)

Ruchama's family came to Israel from a rural region in Poland. Both of her parents grew up in religious homes, like most Jews at that time, certainly the ones who lived outside of the big cities. Her father was so enthralled by communist ideas, she says, that for months he secretly saved money to be able to go to Russia in the 1920s.

"The night before he was about to leave," she says, "his father walked into his room and said: 'I know you have been saving money and I know what for. I want to ask you to promise me one thing: do you want to go? Go. Go to America, go to Palestine. Just promise me that you will not go to Russia. They'll kill you.' My dad promised and kept his promise."

Your parents settled in the Geula neighborhood of Jerusalem. You were born in 1937. Do you remember the British Mandate in Jerusalem?

"Of course. I remember the Australian soldiers patrolling the streets, and walking to the Western Wall with my grandmother. We would walk through the Old City past the Arab merchants; there was no fear. There was no great friendship either, but there was no fear.

"In Jerusalem there was a curfew every night. I remember one night when I stayed over at a girlfriend's house until after curfew, and I went out into the street and started walking home. An Australian soldier called to me, but I didn't understand what he was saying, since I didn't speak English. He caught up with me and tried to understand what I was doing there, where I was going.

"He was a giant, probably six ft. tall. I don't know how it happened, but he took my hand and walked me home. A little girl with a giant Australian soldier.

"The grandmother who used to take me with her to the Western Wall was killed by a shell in the beginning of the War of Independence. She went out to bring water in a bucket to a neighbor who had small children and was hit by a shell fired by the Arabs a shell fired by the Arabs. A little later we moved to Tel Aviv, which was a completely different world.

"Tel Aviv was much different from Jerusalem. It had a feeling of strangeness and wildness. We lived in an area on the outskirts of town; there were hardly any houses there. It was surrounded by Arab orchards, gardens, and fields of sugarcane growing toward the Yarkon River. It was another world."

President's Speech

Did you have any friends in Tel Aviv? It must not have been easy.

"I didn't know anybody here, of course. And in that generation parents and children hardly spoke to one another. But in the house across from us, the only house close by, there was an Arab family. They had an orchard, a garden, and a small herd of sheep and goats.

"They had two children, Zeidin, who was about a year younger than me, and Fatima, who was a bit older than me. They were my best friends. We used to play together, spend our days together in the orchards and in nature. I loved them.

"At the end of 1947 soldiers came and evicted the family. I remember standing and watching that scene unfold. They loaded what little belongings they had and their old grandmother on a donkey and set off for the east. Their house still exists to this day — it was turned into a synagogue."

In the 1956 Sinai War you also saw things that left a deep mark on you.

"The murder of prisoners by the soldiers in my unit, Givati."

What happened there?

"In the days following the Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian soldiers continued to surrender. They would come out of the sand dunes, sometimes barefoot, black from the desert sun, dirt, and sweat, with their hands up.

"Our soldiers shot them. Dozens of them, maybe more. That's just what I saw. They would come down from the dunes and the soldiers lifted their guns and killed them."

And what did they do with them? Did they just leave them on the sand?

"Yes. It left me sick. Physically sick. I vomited and was in a terrible state. I went to my commander and asked for a leave. I told him it was because of what happened. Needless to say, he completely 'did not know' what I was talking about. But he approved my leave and I hitchhiked home.

"I wanted to talk about what happened. I wanted to publish it, but nobody agreed. They told me to leave it alone. I had friends who worked at newspapers, and I thought, naively, that they might want to publish it. Nobody agreed to touch it. When I was 19 I already knew that what they told me about Zionism and the army was a pile of lies."

An Internet search about the killing of prisoners during the Sinai War led to several links, including an interview with Brig. Gen. Arie Biro, who admitted that he and his soldiers murdered Egyptian prisoners during that war. I can only assume that the murders that took place were far more common and serious than the ones found in the "inquiry" ordered by Shimon Peres in 1995.

After the army you went to medical school. At the time there were quotas for women.

"Yes. There was a quota and they didn't want a lot of women to become doctors. So they limited them to a 10 percent quota. I waged a struggle against that along with other students and faculty members, leading to the cancellation of the quota. Since then women are admitted to medical school in Israel based on their qualifications, just like men."

After all of your years working with human psychology and the conflict, do you see any change? If I understand you correctly, despite the tremendous propaganda skills Israel has developed, despite the ongoing brainwashing, from what you're saying it seems that it was the same in the 1950s.

"First of all, Zionism and what a human being *is* are two things that don't intersect. But there has been no essential change here. It's more of the same. It's true that the Zionist propaganda machine would make the Soviets proud, but the essence of the beliefs about basic things, about the treatment of the Arabs and their place — those beliefs have not changed."

A mental health revolutionary

At 80, Marton is still an active psychiatrist. In her many years in the profession, she has advocated and campaigned to take mental health care out of the psychiatric hospitals and bring it into the community.

I was very surprised that there was someone in Israel talking about psychiatric care as part of the community. It actually means normalizing mental health.

"Why shouldn't there be a psychiatric clinic inside the neighborhood health clinic? There should be an optometrist, an ENT, and a psychiatrist. In exactly the same place, at the same level, in the same corridor, with the same concept."

You believed in this very early in your career, and you took concrete steps to make it happen.

"I was the first person in Israel who brought a proposal to the medical establishment — I went all the way to Shimon Peres and others, I told them that mental health clinics do not need to be in psychiatric hospitals. It's a disaster, no less. People have that terrible stigma that deters them from entering a psychiatric hospital.

"There was one director, Davidson (Prof. Shamaï Davidson, Director of the Shalvata Hospital from 1973-1986. He moved to Israel from Dublin in 1955 — A.M.), he really was a saint; he really understood and supported the idea of community-based psychiatric care. The concept of community is something he brought with him from the diaspora. He listened to me with an open heart and was the one who carried out that revolution and led to the opening of a psychiatric treatment clinic at a clinic in Morasha, and then in Ramat Hasharon, and from there it just spread.

To this day the project has not been completed. But we did break that initial wall.

Do you know how many people don't ask for help because the clinic is located inside a psychiatric hospital? And then what happens? They break down and get hospitalized. Great! We got what we wanted."

I'm listening to what you're saying and thinking: there is something justified about people's fear of the psychiatric system. Something about the system's perception of itself and of the patient — it's sick.

"That's very true. That was what I was fighting for. But today my fighting days are behind me. After 30 or 40 years, I've had enough. Maybe I didn't succeed in everything, but I did in some things. I'm very proud of it."

Do you think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or about the Zionist story, in psychological terms? The story of murdering prisoners, for example, the likes of which I heard from people close to me, fills me with deep shame.

"I am fascinated by the subject of shame. It is the emotion I have worked with most for years. I believe that without shame there is no hope for the world — there is no human being. Without shame a person can do anything. One of the things that has happened to us is that we have lost all shame. The soldiers who shot the prisoners were not ashamed. That is why they did what they did."



Marton seen with Dr. Eyad al-Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Mental Health Foundation in the early days of Physicians for Human Rights. (Physicians for Human Rights)

Where else do you see examples of such shamelessness?

"In my profession. Palestinians who were involved in terrorism, or at least accused of it, are sent to psychiatric evaluation. You might be surprised to hear this, but there are simply no Palestinians with mental illnesses — at least not the kinds that prevent them from being tried by Israel. Palestinians do not have the right to be crazy."

Israeli psychiatrists examine Palestinian defendants and know that they suffer from various psychiatric conditions, yet they still declare them competent to stand trial?

"Of course they know. And how do I know that they know? Because after they are tried and sent to prison, they receive medication for schizophrenia. And these are not errors of ignorance. I'm talking about good doctors. Yet still they give ridiculous and erroneous diagnoses.

"I went there and saw for myself. I spoke to prisoners. I wrote about it in the newspaper at the time. I was disciplined by the Israel Medical Association for naming doctors who were involved in such diagnoses. They intended to sue me but they decided to let it go so as not to expose the public to all of the dirty tricks that go on behind closed doors. I was then forced to write a letter of apology. I wrote the letter, which included two lines of apology followed by a full account of the things I knew, including the mistaken diagnoses and what was behind them. That letter has not been published to this day."

That was not the end of Marton's and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel's trouble with the Israeli Medical Association and the Israeli establishment. In 2009 the Association announced it was cutting ties with PHRI, after the organization accused Israeli doctors of taking part in torture. Furthermore, the Tax Authority has refused to renew the organization's status as a public institution for tax purposes, ever since it published a statement according to which the occupation is a violation of human rights — including the right to health. According to the Tax Authority, such statements are deemed "political."

Medicine is a political issue

How did Physicians for Human Rights-Israel begin?

"When I wanted to do something practical, something political, I used that which was most available to me: medicine. I contacted a Palestinian medical organization. Palestinian volunteers used to go out to treat people in the field, and I joined them.



Marton rides along with and volunteers on the way a Physicians for Human Rights trip to the West Bank. (Physicians for Human Rights)

"After a while I began organizing volunteers from Israel. I had to beg people to go out with me on Saturday mornings. At first I managed to get two people, which felt like a huge achievement. Now around 30 volunteers go out [to the West Bank] with the mobile clinic.

"I made the organization's rules: it is always us and the Palestinians together. It is never a delegation of white colonialists going out to rescue the natives. We work together in full agreement with our Palestinian partners; they say where they need us, and in the absolute majority of cases that is where we go."

And where do you work? It's not as if they have organized clinics.

"Clinics? There are hardly any clinics in those villages, and the ones that exist are small and unsuitable for big teams like ours. We use schools and offices of local councils. And you don't need to make some big announcement — word gets around in the village and in the nearby villages. First thing on Saturday morning, there are already too many people."

What treatments do you provide?

"Anything that one can do in the field, including relatively simple surgeries. We bring donated medications with us, and write prescriptions for medications we don't have. When there is a need for complicated exams we refer to different hospitals in the Palestinian Authority and Israel. That also involved many years of struggle."

The State of Israel never considered itself responsible for the health of those it occupied.

"Right. But until Oslo, or until the First Intifada, there were Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which became Israeli government hospitals after 1967. There was a very limited medical budget, nothing like in a normal country. But, for example, there was a vaccination budget. Paradoxically, in the refugee camps, the situation was much better, since they were under the responsibility of UNRWA.

When the First Intifada broke out, one of the decisions made by then-Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin was to stop the budget for Palestinian medical services. When I heard about this I flew to London and showed up at the offices of the BBC. I told them about the situation in the occupied territories, and they sent a team to do a brief item about that decision and its outcome, namely people dying in their homes because of the lack of medical care. The uproar convinced Rabin to restore at least part of the budget."

Go home, get dressed

A few days ago there was a [photo in the newspaper](#) of the head of the Mossad visiting the home of the U.S. national security advisor. All the people in the photo were men. I'm really happy to say that such a photo looks strange to me today.

"That brings me back again to the subject of segregation. That is how people are taught to think about themselves. That separation, the fact that there is a women's gallery [in synagogue], and now they want separation in the army and the universities too. Segregation is the root of all evil.

"My first wars were not over the Palestinian issue. They were feminist, even though I didn't call it that at the time."

You are a proud woman.

"Not enough. I mean I'm too proud to ask for credit, and sometimes I'm full of resentment that I don't get it. For example, I was the first one to introduce the concept of "human rights" into the Israeli discourse. Before that there were "civil rights," but human rights as a political concept is my work."

Yet you still don't feel comfortable demanding recognition.

"That's right. Maybe it's the result of my feminine education. Not feminist, *feminine*. The kind that teaches women not to stand out. To be nice, smile, not to get angry. To never start a sentence with the word 'I.' That's how women are raised."

You are outraged by chauvinism. It's not that different from your outrage at the occupation.

"My whole life I had to contend with stigmas and separate rules for women. With the fact that women were not allowed to wear pants in medical school in the Jerusalem cold. When I showed up with pants one female lecturer said to me: "Young lady, go home, get dressed properly and come back." I went home and I didn't come back. I raised hell, and in the end I won."

Criticism of all sides

You are very critical of the Israeli Left and the way it confronts the occupation.

"There is no Israeli Left. What we need to do is start Israel's human rights organizations from scratch so that they are willing to fight to end apartheid. Apartheid that distinguishes between those who have everything and those who have nothing. Those who are allowed everything and those who are forbidden everything. If they are unwilling to undertake that fight, what are they fighting for? For their own self image.

"You can't fight colonialism, occupation, apartheid — call it what you want — by playing in the government's court, according to the government's agenda. You must breach those boundaries."

The Labor Party actually maintained the occupation for 10 whole years and didn't do anything about it.

"Don't say Mapai didn't do anything. They were the ones who established the settlements. Begin was the only righteous leader we have had. I mean it. Under his rule torture was completely forbidden. When the head of the Shin Bet came to him and asked 'Sir, not even a slap?' He said: 'No. Not even a slap.'

"Begin forbade demolishing houses, he forbade expulsion. He was the only righteous man in Sodom. There was not a single righteous man either before him or after him."

I always thought, and still think, that the normal moderate Revisionist Right is the camp with the best chances of treating the Arabs humanely.

"I don't want humane treatment of the Arabs. I want political rights. After that you can be humane or whatever you want. Without political you continue to be a colonialist, an occupier, an apartheidist.

"A human rights organization that is not willing to fight for that is howling at the moon. It is meaningless."

In a sense you are also talking about yourself. This is also a personal reckoning.

"That's right. I'm talking to you after 30 or maybe 50 years of fighting the occupation. We need outside help. And I'm talking mainly about one thing: BDS."

Working in Israel for that cause is not easy.

She laughs. "It's a matter for traitors, and today's traitors are tomorrow's heroes. Anyone who is not willing to pay that price does not know how to fight. If you don't pay a price you are fighting only for your own beautiful image. As long as the occupation continues, as long as apartheid continues, it doesn't matter if you are a little more or less beautiful."



Physician for Human Rights volunteers hand out medication from a mobile clinic in the West Bank. (Oren Ziv/Activestills.org)

She stops to think for a moment.

"We have to fight the idea of segregation, because it separates between me and the political, between the Arab and his land, between the Arab and his human dignity. Segregation is the wound. It is the axis around which things revolve."

Even though Jews brought the idea of segregation here with them. After all, there are all kinds of segregation among the Jews themselves, along ethnic, religious, and political lines.

"There surely is segregation here on all levels. After all, we are divided here into first-class and second-class Jews, and beneath them are Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the Palestinians in the West Bank are even lower. At the very bottom of the ladder are the asylum seekers and the refugees (Physicians for Human Rights holds an "[Open Clinic](#)" that provides medical care to refugees and asylum seekers, A.M.).

"Segregation exists within our society as a central political principal. If we cancel segregation, then what? It will be a political disaster for the regime — not just for the Right.

"When I think about what my organization has done — about the trips to Gaza, about handing out medicine out of solidarity, about managing to shatter segregation — that has our biggest achievement."

Alon Mizrahi is a writer and a blogger at Local Call, where this article was first published in Hebrew. Read it [here](#). Translated from the original Hebrew by Shoshana London Sappir.

President's Speech to the PHR-IL General Assembly

[Tel Aviv, May 2012]

President's Speech

I would like to use this meeting with the PHRI members to tell all of you how important my relationship with you is to me, both personally and organizationally. I want to express my deepest gratitude to all the members who keep in touch in writing and orally, who call me about political issues connected to what is happening in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

I thank all who volunteer at the mobile clinic in the oPt and at the open clinic in the office; all the members who devote time and effort to the organization's activities and to you, who are attending the general assembly today. Thanks to you, I continue and will continue to fight for the organization's spirit, for what we, you and I, see as important and significant.

When I founded the organization in 1988, the term **human rights** did not exist in Israeli public discourse and there were no organizations devoted to human rights. Civil rights – yes. Human rights – no. The founding of the organization was a dramatic point in Israeli public discourse. As you know, no woman is ahead of her time, there are only those who are late to arrive.

The Organization of Israeli and Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights was followed by quite a few organizations that engaged in fighting for human rights – some still exist and some don't. The major achievement for Physicians for Human Rights-IL is the very fact that the term human rights came to be included in Israeli discourse, both among the general public and among policy makers.

From a small, unknown group without a budget, without an office, with no paid staff, we have become what we are today: we are recognized. We have a large office, an annual budget of about 5.7 million NIS (New Israeli Shekels)/\$1.6 million and a staff of 25, but size isn't

everything. The organization's spirit, its way of thinking and its leadership have guided it on its impressive path. They are the critical factors that have made the organization what it is. If we want to continue on this path, we must beware of the pitfalls that lie ahead and pay close attention to where we are going so that we don't lose what's important along the way.

A human rights organization is a political, radical organization by nature. We are political in that we want to bring about social change, shake the political structure which oppresses Palestinians in the Occupied Territory, and migrant workers, women, the elderly, refugees and Israeli Palestinians and other groups inside Israel. In our view, joining forces with the existing, oppressive, power structure necessarily prevents the much needed change.

A radical group is, by definition, outside the consensus. It is not forced to be outside the consensus, it chooses to. The willingness not to be part of the mainstream, the regime, is a key aspect of radical thinking.

A radical human rights organization tries to understand the root causes of the evil (that's what makes it radical) and then directs its efforts and resources toward changing the evil at the root. This part of the organization's work is the most difficult, because it is always easier to provide immediate humane help to those who are sick and suffering, i.e. humanitarian aid, rather than fight a long battle against great powers.

A radical health organization has to pave its own way, which is a difficult one, a way that combines humanitarian help and intervention which stem from its medical obligations with a moral fight against the roots of oppression.

There is an apparent material contradiction between a radical political battle and a humanitarian approach: In a radical battle one normally picks a side. Its language is the language

of struggle: “us” versus “them,” “good” versus “bad.” In struggles such as these, the human aspects are sometimes forgotten. In contrast, the humanitarian approach tends to ignore political aspects and focus on providing medical treatment and other kinds of aid and in so doing loses the distinctions between “us” and “them.” What is worse, because they avoid taking a political stance, humanitarian organizations often actually serve the oppressors and the human rights violators.

It is difficult to synthesize a radical political battle with universal humanism – on the ideological, practical and emotional levels alike. This is why this synthesis requires an effort to arrive at the highest level of critical thought and analysis. This synthesis has to be remade time and time again.

Throughout our 24 years, we have managed to stay aware of the delicate, and sometimes rougher, seams that connect the different aspects. We see these seams and we make sure not to ignore them when we are about to decide on the organization’s activity.

In the crucial General Assembly that was held in 2005, we faced a fateful question. As you may recall, the question was whether the organization was a group with a clear political agenda, a group that fights the occupation, or, as some members suggested, an a-political group of doctors with a medical-humanitarian agenda. In this battle for the organization’s soul, the political agenda prevailed with a sweeping majority of the votes and the organization was saved from reducing itself to a routine of doing good, humanitarian deeds (we almost became a charity organization), devoid of critical thinking and political insight.

Thanks to this spirit, and the understanding that medicine, health and human rights are inseparable from politics, the organization successfully navigated through Israel's Zionist public's mass shift to the right.

Since the organization is an integral part of Israeli society, we have to be aware of the fact that we are not just trying to influence, but that we may also be unwittingly influenced by the general public sentiment. We therefore have a duty to keep this in mind and be on guard not to get swept up in the general stream.

Today, more than ever, we have to ask ourselves tough questions. If we do not ask them, we will not get at the profound answers and all we'll have left will be quantitative criteria – more money, more members... quality, principles, will be lost.

We have to ask again: Who are we politically? What is our social role?

And also: Who aren't we? What are we fighting against?

At this point I want to address the occupation once again. There have been many discussions about this issue in the past, that is, on the basic understanding that the occupation is the ideological and practical infrastructure for human rights violations in their different manifestations. Reducing our battle against human rights violations to the medical field only is clearly an impediment to understanding the broader picture. In other words, this reduction is really a type of blindness which actually serves the existing system.

“There is no merciful occupation. There is no merciful way to control people against their will. There are only two possibilities: accepting the occupation and the methods required for

enforcing it or denying not just specific, defined practices, but the broader purpose that justifies them and for which they are essential.” (Simone de Beauvoir in her article about Algeria).

It is as if de Beauvoir was talking about Israel and the “benevolent occupation” in which a large part of the public believed in the past. Today, when the Israeli fiction of a benevolent occupation is no more, we have to understand the government’s need for extrajudicial executions, the occupation’s need for torture, “security,” i.e., political prisoners in general and administrative detention in particular. We have to understand the need for checkpoints, land and water grabs and the draconian restrictions on the Palestinian economy and fabric of life: all these are means to a single end: controlling another nation.

We could reduce the battle to one aspect of human rights abuse or another, but we mustn’t restrict critical thinking of the profound understanding of the political process. In other words: we must continue to develop our critical and radical thinking so that our message is clear to us and to the public and the political institutions.

In tough times such as these, we mustn’t try to address the threat to our existence and other difficulties by obscuring our message or joining forces with elements that are our opposites.

Therefore, we have to take great care to avoid creating a gap between the excellent work done by the staff, the executive director and the volunteers and an absence of deep critical thinking and informed analysis of the social and political reality. If this happens, our actions might reach a broad common denominator, but it will be a low one. Without political thought and debate, our actions would degrade into an automatic routine. Without a radical spirit that seeks to eradicate the abusive infrastructure, we may become an organization of good people

who do good deeds but one that isn't an organization that fights for human rights; in other words – a charity. The temptation is great. It's much easier to feel sorry for people, to be compassionate, to do good deeds and have the bonus of feeling as a good person. It's much harder to wage an uncompromising battle, which often leaves us on the outside, all the while knowing that the bonuses of a war that has been won arrive late, if ever:

The proliferation of social NGOs is one of the outcomes of the neo-liberal economy. This economy exacerbates violence and depletes welfare programs: it restricts the development of the water supply system, electricity, education, health, public transportation, culture and support for the elderly, people with disabilities and other disempowered groups. NGOs have proliferated both in Israel and around the world and they try to step in for the government in all the areas where governments have turned their backs. They are characteristically devoid of a broad political viewpoint.

These NGOs operate within the neo-liberal framework. They do not offer a political or ideological alternative for the crushing neo-liberal program. These organizations usually help individuals as a charity, replacing the rights that were supposed to be granted as part of the population's social rights. They make people dependant on aid, and people with dependencies do not develop political consciousness, or their political consciousness is severely impaired. These types of organizations turn into mediators between aggressive powers, like the USA or the Israeli occupation, and their subjects. They take on the role of go-betweens, mediators between the occupying power and the occupied, as well as between the citizens who are wronged, or migrant workers and refugees.

These organizations (like La'tet and many others) provide charity/donations/help/meals/clothes for a fraction of the cost the government should have invested. Any aid program (economic, social, medical, health related etc.) that does not take account of the political and historical context, not only helps the occupying or colonial powers, but encourages the recipients to accept that they are helpless victims and perpetuates this position. These types of programs reinforce the age-old divisions: white, rich, enlightened, technically and economically advanced male versus black, African, Palestinian, female, etc., always at the bottom of the food chain. To call a spade a spade – this is classic racism; racism that preserves the existing order.

Those who declare themselves apolitical, the Israel Medical Association for example, are in fact entirely political organizations. Out of a blindness that serves their purpose, they perceive the politics of consent with the regime as “apolitical.” The politics of change, which is innately opposed to the politics of consent and conservation, is the one that is seen as political. PHR-IL’s agenda is to have the state live up to its duties. It is not PHR-IL’s job to do the state’s work for it by providing charity.

For PHR-IL, running clinics and providing medical care is part of the struggle, not a replacement for it.

I want to remind the General Assembly the resolution passed a few years back to hold critical debate forums on social-political issues. This resolution was not followed as routinely as it should have. I propose to renew the resolution, decide on the number of forums that should be held every year and follow through. I suggest appointing one of the board members to be responsible for holding these debate forums. Two more individuals from the board or the staff

can be selected to help choose the topics for the forums. I would be happy to be part of the team that prepares the forums. The executive director would see to implementation.

With your help, I intend to continue encouraging the board to hold discussions on political issues related to human rights violations and promote these in all the areas you have entrusted to me.

Today, we elect new members for the board of directors. It is an expression of the need for renewal and self-reflection. I am happy for it and I applaud it. I am convinced that all the candidates are good, worthy people who are dedicated to the organization and its values. I hope that your votes are guided primarily by the following question: Does the candidate envision an a-political, medical, humanitarian organization (a sort of charity), or does the candidate believe in an organization that wages a political battle for human rights? And so, I am asking the candidates to first present to the membership their agenda - how they see the organization: a political organization fighting against domination over another nation and for human rights or an organization with a purely humanitarian agenda?

Thank you all and may we have successful elections.

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SPEECH TO PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS-ISRAEL'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY
[Tel Aviv, September 27, 2013)

Hi all and thank you for coming to the 25th 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*. A member of our organization 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-IL 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 our dream today?

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

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