

Interview with Ruchama Marton

Founder and former chair of Physicians for Human Rights (Israel)

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According to you, what was the departure point of this huge social movement in Israel?

What happened is that this young girl, Daphne Liff was expelled from her apartment in Tel-Aviv and she decided to put a tent in the middle of Rothschild Boulevard, a very in place in the city.

She didn't think, she didn't plan anything else. She was desperate, she wanted to have a personal change and she didn't know what to do. It happened probably in the right social time. The "Physicians for Human Rights" organization that I founded 24 years ago, started more or less with the same dynamics; I went to Gaza without any plan. I didn't know what would happen, that the small group of people who went there with me would stay together and that it would become such a movement. Imagine! That a viable and useful organization would develop like this.

What happened is that Daphne went out at the right time for many young people in Israel who were like her.

How did it spread?

She has friends and it's summer; everyone is outside.

Some saw her tent.

In the period of vacation, young people, students leave the apartment they rented during the school year for 2-3 months and start to look for another one for the next school year, because they cannot afford to pay a rent during the vacation, which is creasily high. The amount to pay for a modest apartment in Tel-Aviv for instance is more or less equal to a monthly salary. But you need to eat, to go out, you have all kind of expenses. So these young people have to decide on what to spend.

And it caught so many people in the same situation.

Did she use the social networks too, like Facebook, Twitter?

Of course! If they would have waited for the traditional media to spread the information, they could have stayed there alone forever. And it worked like magic. In no time, thousands of people knew about what was going on and they joined. And in days, hundreds of new tents were there.

And it spread in other cities.

Not immediately.

At first, the traditional media treated them like shit.

Condescending. "Who are you?" The first thing was: "Ah they are leftists", which is a very pejorative way to present people in Israel.

Or "they are spoiled children who always want more".

"They don't want to work or to go to the periphery".

And this is creasy. Most of those young people are studying or working in Tel-Aviv, which is the main place in Israel. What can they do in the periphery? For those young people, the periphery is a desert.

How did it move from Tel-Aviv to the rest of the contry.

The same way: the social networks and because in other cities, you have exactly the same situation. And then, other people, the middle class and some true homeless people, who are not students, the underprivileged, did their own thing. The really poor people didn't go to Rothschild Boulevard. They stayed in their own place, the Levinsky slum where they are staying, refugees, migrant workers, illegal people., single parents with one, two or three children. They don't go to Rothschild. They stay where they are.

And then, a great thing happened: the traditional media changed their attitude. They started to interview them on TV.

Why?

They saw on which side of the bread is the butter (an Hebrew expression).

So, the butter is there, so we are going where the butter is.

This changed the attitude of the media after the first demonstration. It happened two weeks later, when there were like 15.000 people in the streets of Tel-Aviv, which is huge in leftist terms.

And then three times more. So something serious was happening.

And then there were around half million people in the whole country!

In a population of seven millions where 20% are Palestinians who didn't really take part, it means that the core of the society, the active people were there.

You can evaluate the participation at around three times more.

Can you say something about the reaction of the government?

We have such a wonderful government!

I love them. They never disappoint me. You can trust them. They repeated time and again what the media said in the beginning: "you are extremists, you are leftists. The only thing you want is to put down Bibi (Benjamin Netanyahu).

The leftists are pushing you. You are naïve. The left is using you.

You need to go to the periphery and work hard".

And then, after the huge demonstration, they started to change their discourse.

They started to pour out empty promises: we will do this and that. But the people, most of the people, are no stupid; they behave like they are stupid but they are not.

Why do they behave as if they are stupid?

A collective is not a monolith. One can be very bright and one can be very stupid at the same time.

The Israeli governments not only Bibi, all of them, are using threats on a very high scale. And they are really good at it. They know how to do it. Every here and then, there is a new horrible catastrophic threat. And they are keeping people frightened, scared and it works

Because of the external threat?

Not only.

It doesn't matter as long as people feel threatened

The Palestinians are always there as a threat.

It changes form time to time, you can have the Iraqis, the Iranians.

It has nothing to do with the reality. The issue is to keep the people frightened.

Because it is easy to control people when they are frightened

Like children, they want a big, strong man, not a woman to save them.

And this is the prime minister or the minister of defense. And they are always there and they are there to tell you what to think, what to say, what to do and not to do.

And, all of a sudden, there is a change. But still they are trying to frighten them.

"You, are going to lead Israel to an economic catastrophe, like Greece, or Spain."

But people buy it but less and less. So really something essential happened

Was this change influenced by what happened around Israel, the Arab Spring?

Especially Egypt. The Tahrir Square had such an influence in many different levels. When Tahrir Square happened, as usual, I went to the West Bank on a Saturday. It was in Jenin, if I remember rightly. I spoke to people. I asked: what do you think about Tahrir?

In fact, my question- untold-was: what are you going to do?

Where is your Tahrir Square?

Different people told me the same answer: "we are the fifth revolution: Tunisia, Bahrein, Egypt, Lybia".

They are not but at least that was their genuine answer.

In Israel they didn't make the same calculation.

But what happened in Egypt had such an influence: Israelis watched TV for hours.

And something was moving.

If a non violent (even if it became violent) protest to change the regime succeeds, if the Egyptians can do it, why not us?

And the government established a committee?

They were forced to do so.

After promising all these empty promises, that everyone knows that they are empty, they proposed as usual to establish a committee. As usual, when you want to bury something you establish a committee.

Trachtenberg, who heads this committee is a decent person, an economist, professor at Tel-Aviv university.

He is not a creasy rightist.

But they handcuffed him. They made it clear that he couldn't change the priorities of the national budget and he didn't receive any power.

So, Daphne, this young, bright woman said: "I am not talking to the Trachtenberg Committee. It's a bluff. I am talking to you, professor Trachtenberg: you should resign immediately. Because what you are doing is taking part in the system, in a huge lie".

And the other leader of the demonstrators, a man, Itzik Shmuli, the leader of the Student organization said yes. He is not a revolutionary person. He said yes. And she said no.

And the traditional media immediately jumped on her: "you have no experience, you don't know how to be political, you don't understand nothing". She didn't care and around her, people were helping her a lot.

The protest people created their own committee with their own professors, not less good than Trachtenberg, even perhaps better, in order to think together on how to change the system, not like Trachtenberg who works to develop a list of demands to the government.

Daphne and her people said: "We are not making a list. We don't want little changes. We want to change the system".

How is it working now?

The Trachtenberg Committee has to present its conclusions now, before 20 September because of the Palestinian debate at the UN.

The other committee is working with the protesters.

This is a very dynamic process. People selected representatives in 18 different places in the country. And they are meeting to discuss the issues at stake because after the huge demonstration, people understood that they cannot go on creating bigger and bigger demonstrations. They knew that they needed to do different things if they wanted to be fruitful. And then somebody came with the proposition to establish discussion circles. I went to the Levinsky neighbourhood many times. This is the place of extreme poverty. We didn't even have tables and chairs there. We sat on the ground. The people there have specific problems: violence, men harassing women, how to manage the popular kitchen and so on.

The discussions went on for hours in those circles, starting with small circles and then, moving to larger ones. The idea was to establish 1000 roundtables all over the country.

In those circles, the participants sit together; everyone is welcome. With one leader and one person taking notes and the leaders received the same directions

on how to manage the tables. It worked very well. All the ideas were collected in order for the main committee to classify them according to coherent and structured order. And this material went to the alternative committee.

What are the settlers saying ?

Nothing. The settlers are not present at all. They tried at the beginning. They were aggressive and they understood quickly that it's not their place. They were absent.

And the religious community?

The religious people do not take part. Some of the not very religious people are present but this is essentially a secular movement. The Palestinians joined later. I went to Qalanswa in the Triangle, where they created their own tent a huge one.

There is big fear in all kinds of circle to be identified with the Palestinian conflict.

The first tendency of the protesters was a kind of reaction to this blaming finger of the government: " You are leftists". In one of those huge articles in the press, you could read an explanation why the demonstrators choosed to establish their tents on Rothschild boulevard. It connects with Sheinkin street, the "leftist" street of Tel-Aviv. The article mentioned that the communist party has an office in this street. And it explained that this was the reason why they choosed this place. So, this argument was powerful in the first days. And the tent movement started by being defensive on a personal and collective level.

So this is one thing. Maybe it is not the whole picture. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. The middle class Jewish Israelis, have such a long tradition, an inner tradition to ignore and actively not knowing what's going on in the Occupied Territories. They don't know what to do with it. This is why people like "Breaking the Silence" (an Israeli NGO composed by former soldiers telling about their experience during their military service in the occupied Territories) are so annoying to the Israeli society. And they are not the only ones.

They don't want to see. They don't want to know. It is too disturbing. And I guess this is another reason. But then maybe, as a third point, it was too much to comprehend in one protest. It was really a petit personal problem, which became huge. But Daphne Liff is a political person. She is not a stupid student. When she was 18 years old, she signed a letter declaring that she didn't want to serve in the army, on of the few teenagers who did it. She is a political person. She went to the Rothschild Boulevard not to solve the occupation. She really went to solve her personal and social problem. And now, after 2 months and hopefully in the near future, many people will start to see the connection, more than a connection, a kind of a vicious circle, what we are doing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and make the link between the economic situation and the whole system governing Israel, this really extreme capitalist system which makes very few people so rich and the rest of the population so poor. I wrote more that 10 years ago, that in Israel, the gap between the haves and the haves

not, is the highest in the world and this is going on for years. It is not new. And people started to feel it on their own body.