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## **Ruchama Marton - Founder and President of Physicians for Human Rights - about the Protests in Israel**

*What do you think the point of departure of this huge social movement in Israel was?*

What happened is that this young woman, Daphnie Liff was expelled from her apartment in Tel Aviv, and she decided to put up a tent in the middle of Rothschild Boulevard, in a very “in”- part of the city. She didn’t think..., she didn’t plan anything else. She was desperate, she wanted to achieve a change in her personal life, and she didn’t know what to do. It probably happened at the right time, socially. The organization Physicians for Human Rights, that I founded 24 years ago, started more or less with the same dynamics: I went to Gaza with no plan. I didn’t know what would happen, that the small group of people who went there with me would stay together, or that it would become such a movement. Imagine! That a viable and useful organization would develop like that. What happened is that Daphnie did what she did at the right time for many young people in Israel who are like her.



*How did it spread?*

She has friends and it was summer; everyone was outside, and some saw her tent. During the vacation period, many young people, students, leave the apartment they have rented during the college term for two to three months, and start looking for another one for the next school year, because they can’t afford to pay rent during the vacation, which is incredibly high. The amount you 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 kinds of expenses. So these young people have to decide what to spend their money on. So this action caught a lot of people in the same situation.

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

Of course! If they’d waited for the traditional media to spread the information, they would have sat there alone forever. And it worked like magic. In no time, thousands of people knew about what was going on, and they joined in. And within a few days, hundreds of new tents were there. And it spread to other cities. Not immediately. At first, the traditional media treated them like shit. They were condescending: “Who the hell are you?” The first thing was: “Ah, they’re leftists”, which is a very pejorative way to describe people in Israel. Or else: “They’re spoiled children who always want more.” “They don’t want to work, or to move to the periphery of the country.” But that’s crazy. Most of those young people study or work in Tel Aviv, which is the main place in Israel. What are they supposed to do in these peripheral areas? For those young people, the periphery is a desert.

*How did the movement spread from Tel Aviv to the rest of the country?*

The same way: through the social networks – and because in other cities, you have exactly the same situation. And then, other people who are not students, the middle class and some real homeless people, the underprivileged, did it in their own way. The really poor people didn't go to Rothschild Boulevard. They stayed in their own neighbourhoods, like the Levinsky Slum – refugees, migrant workers and illegal people, and single parents with one, two or three children. They didn't go to Rothschild. They stayed where they were. And then, a great thing happened: the traditional media changed their attitude. They started to interview them on TV.

*Why?*

They saw which side their bread was buttered on. So that was where the butter was, and that's where they went. That changed the attitude of the media after the first demonstration. It happened two weeks later, when 15,000 people were present in the streets of Tel Aviv, which is huge for the left. And then three times as many. So something serious was happening. And then there were about half a million people demonstrating, all over the country! Out of a population of seven million, of which 20% are Palestinians who didn't really take part. That means that the core of society, the active people, were there. You can estimate the total participation at around three times that number.

*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 had said in the beginning: "You are extremists, you are leftists. The only thing you want is to put down Bibi (PM Benjamin Netanyahu). The leftists are pushing you. You are naïve. The left is using you. You should move to the periphery, and work hard". And then, after the huge demonstrations, they started to change their tune. They started to pour out empty promises: we'll do this, we'll do that. But the people, most of the people, aren't stupid; they've acted stupid for a long time, but they aren't really.

*Why do they act stupid?*

A collective isn't a monolith. You can be very bright and very stupid at the same time. The Israeli governments – not only Bibi, all of them – make use of the sense of threat at a very high level. And they are really good at it. They know how to do it. Every now and then, there is some new horrible, catastrophic threat. And keep 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. But it changes from time to time; there were the Iraqis, and then the Iranians. It has nothing to do with the reality. The point 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 that means the prime minister or the minister of defence. 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 then, all of a sudden, there's a change, but they still keep trying to frighten people. They tell us: "You, are going to lead Israel to an economic catastrophe, like Greece or Spain." But people are buying it less and less. So really something essential has happened.



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

Yes, especially Egypt. The Tahrir Square had a really powerful influence at many different levels. When Tahrir Square happened, as usual, I went to the West Bank on a Saturday. I was in Jenin, if I remember right. and I spoke to people. I asked them: “What do you think about Tahrir?” In fact, my unspoken question was: “What are you going to do? Where is your Tahrir Square?”.

Different people gave me similar answers: “We are the fifth revolution: Tunisia, Bahrain, Egypt, and Libya”. They aren’t, but this was really their answer. People in Israel didn’t view it in the same terms. But what happened in Egypt still had a great effect: Israelis watched TV for hours. And something was going on. If a non-violent protest – even if it did become violent – to change the regime can succeed, if the Egyptians can do it, why can’t we?

*What about the committee established by the government?*

They were forced to do that. After all these empty promises, that everyone knows are empty, they proposed, as usual, to establish a committee. As usual, when you want to bury something, you establish a committee. Trajtenberg, who heads this committee, is a decent person, an economist, and a professor at Tel Aviv University. He’s not a crazy rightist. But they handcuffed him. They made it clear that he couldn’t change the national budget, and he didn’t receive any power.

So, Daphnie, this young, bright woman said: “I am not talking to the Trajtenberg Committee. It’s a bluff. I am talking to you, Professor Trajtenberg: you should resign immediately. Because what you are doing is taking part in the system, in a huge lie”. But the other leader of the demonstrators, a man, Itzik Shmuli, the leader of the student organization, said “yes” to the committee. 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 anything”. She didn’t care, and the people around her were helping her a lot. The protest people created their own committee with their own professors, people who are just as good as Trajtenberg, maybe even better, in order to think together about how to change the system, not like Trajtenberg, who is working on a list of demands to present to the government. Daphnie and her people said: “We are not making any list. We don’t want little changes. We want to change the system”.

*What’s happening now?*

The Trajtenberg Committee has to present its conclusions now, before the end of September. The other committee is working with the protesters. This is a very dynamic process. People have 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 couldn’t just keep holding bigger and bigger demonstrations. They knew that they would have to do something different if they wanted to have an effect. And then somebody came up with the proposal to establish discussion circles.

I have been to the Lewinsky neighbourhood many times. It’s a place of extreme poverty. We didn’t even have tables and chairs there. We sat on the ground. The people there have very specific problems: violence, men harassing women, or how to manage the people’s 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, similar to the circles in the protest tents. In those circles, there was a chair and a secretary. The chairs all received the same directions on how to manage the round tables. It worked very well. All the ideas were collected so that the main committee could classify them in a coherent and structured order. And this material went to the alternative committee.

*What are the settlers saying?*

The settlers say nothing; they 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 somewhat religious people are present, but this is essentially a secular movement. The Palestinians joined later. I went to Qalansuwa in the Triangle [an Israeli-Arab region], where they created their own tent a huge one.

There is big fear in all parts of the circles of being identified with the Palestinian conflict. The first tendency of the protesters was a kind of reaction to this accusing finger of the government: "You are leftists". In one of these long articles in the press, there was an explanation of why the demonstrators chose to establish their tents on Rothschild Boulevard: Because it crosses Sheinkin Street, the "leftist" street of Tel Aviv. The article notes that the Communist Party's office is on this street. So that was supposedly the reason why the movement chose that place. That kind of argument was powerful during the first days. And the tent movement started by being defensive on a personal and collective level.

So that's one aspect. Maybe it isn't the whole picture. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. The middle class Jewish Israelis have a really long tradition, an inner tradition, of ignoring and actively not knowing about what's going on in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. They lack the psychological tools to deal with these facts. This is why people like Breaking the Silence [an Israeli NGO composed of former soldiers who talk about their experience of military service in the occupied territories) are so annoying to Israeli society. And they aren't the only ones.

They don't want to see. They don't want to know. It's too disturbing. And I guess this is another reason. But then maybe, as a third point, it was too much to comprehend in a single protest. It was really a small personal problem which became huge. But Daphnie Liff is a political person. When she was 18, she signed a letter stating that she didn't want to serve in the army, one of the few teenagers who have done that. She is a political person. But she didn't go to Rothschild Boulevard to solve the occupation, she went to solve her own personal social problem. And now, after two months and hopefully in the near future, many people will start to see the connection – but it's more than a connection, it's a kind of vicious circle. What we are doing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is linked to the economic situation and to the whole system which governs Israel, this really extreme capitalist system that makes a very few people so rich and the rest of the population so poor. I wrote more than

ten years ago, that in Israel, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is the highest in the western world, and that this has been going on for years. It isn't new. And now people have started to feel it on their own bodies, and for the first time have decided not to agree passively to whatever the regime does.

**Dr. Ruchama Marton** is the founder and president of the organization Physicians for Human Rights Israel. The organization was awarded the Alternative Noble Prize in 2010. The interview was held **Simone Susskind**, President of Action in the Mediterranean and member of the International Women's Council (IWC).

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