

Physicians for Human Rights Israel General Assembly

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 Territories.

I thank all who volunteer at the mobile clinic in the Occupied Palestinian Territory 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. It was not used 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** 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 dollars 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 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 desire 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 medical 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. 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 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 take care 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 deeper 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 an 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, 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 a-political, 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 “a-political”. The politics of change, which is innately opposed to the politics of

consent and conservation, is the one that is seen as political. PHR's agenda is to have the state live up to its duties. It is not PHR's job to do the state's work for it by providing charity.

For PHR, 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,

Best

Dr. Ruhama Merton

Founder and president