

Talking for Peace – A Karl Kahane Lecture Series

The Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue
in co-operation with the Karl Kahane Foundation

kindly invites to the lecture of

ARIK W. ASCHERMAN

A RABBINIC VIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISRAEL

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Arik W. Ascherman, Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights

Rabbi Arik W. Ascherman was born in Erie, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Harvard University in 1981 and from 1981-1983 worked for Interns For Peace, a community work program in which Israeli Jews and Arabs as well as Jews from around the world, work together to bring Israeli Jews and Arabs together in positive interaction. For most of this time Rabbi Ascherman lived in the Israeli Arab village of Tamra. Rabbi Ascherman was ordained by HUC-JIR in New York in 1989. During his rabbinical training he took a leave of absence to return to Israel, where he studied in the Schwartz Program for community center directors at Hebrew University. During his rabbinic school years Rabbi Ascherman was also instrumental in setting up a student/faculty run soup kitchen and was active in homeless shelters and advocacy for the homeless. After ordination, Rabbi Ascherman spent two years as the Rabbi/Director of UC Davis Hillel, and three years as the Rabbi of Beth Hillel in Richmond California, where he also set up a homeless shelter which rotated between churches and synagogues. In 1991 Rabbi Ascherman and his wife, Rabbi Einat Ramon, spent 2 weeks in the former Soviet Union working with nascent liberal congregations and schools. After returning to Israel in 1994, Rabbi Ascherman served for three years as the director of Congregation Mevakshei Derech, and three years as the part time rabbi of Kibbutz Yahel, a Reform kibbutz near Eilat. Beginning in 1995 Rabbi Ascherman served as co-director of Rabbis For Human Rights, becoming executive director in 1998. Rabbi Ascherman is married to Rabbi Einat Ramon, the first Israeli born woman to be ordained as a rabbi. To date, they are Israel's only rabbinic couple.

Rabbis for Human Rights

- was founded in 1988, in response to serious abuses of human rights by the Israeli military authorities in the suppression of the Intifada. The indifference of much of the country's religious leadership and religiously identified citizenry to the suffering of innocent people seen as the enemy was a cause of concern to Rabbis for Human Rights organizers;
- is the only Israeli rabbinic organization comprised of Reform, Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbis and students;
- is the rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel;
- reminds and demonstrates to both the religious and the non-religious sectors of the public need to be reminded that Judaism had another face. Human rights abuses are not compatible with the age-old Jewish tradition of humaneness and moral responsibility or the Biblical concern for "The stranger in your midst." - even in the face of the danger to public order and safety which the uprising represented;
- has no affiliation with any political party or ideology. Its members are Israeli citizens;
- is involved in ecumenical dialogue and educational activities. In addition to dealing with violations of human rights of West Bank Palestinians and Israeli Arabs;
- concerns itself with foreign workers, the Israeli health care system, the status of women, Ethiopian Jews, an Israeli bill of rights, to name only a few issues.

Patricia Kahane

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening, welcome to the Kreisky Forum and to the Karl Kahane Lectures once more. It seems a little bit different choice of subject than we usually have. Also tonight there is not going to be a discussion between two people from different sides because I think that the issue Rabbi Ascherman is devoting a lot of his lifetime to and a lot of his energies to is a really important one, especially for us Jews living in the Diaspora, not living in Israel for most of the time. The human rights issues in Israel and the surrounding territories is something that most of us do think about a lot even if we don't talk about it so much. I felt that it needed to be talked about and it needed to be explained by somebody who really knows what he is talking about. This is why I am glad to introduce Rabbi Ascherman who is going to talk about the human rights issues in Israel today. Thank you.

Arik Ascherman

Thank you. It definitely is an honor to be here. The way that I grew up it was simply assumed that to be a Jew is to be concerned with universal human rights and social justice. This what I learned from my parents, from my teachers, from my rabbis, from the community. So when I first spent some time in Israel my first great shock was to find out that bagels were not readily available. And what kind of Jewish state is this if you can't

get bagels? But my more profound shock was to find out that these values that I simply took as axiomatic and not to be questioned were not necessarily shared by all Israelis, particularly religious Israelis. Israel internally is an extremely democratic country. There is a wide range of debates. Views like ours are regularly reported in the mainstream, let alone the alternative media. Israel is split almost straight down the middle on many of our most urgent issues. But most of the people who feel that we do and share the values that we will be speaking about this evening, values promoted through the legacy of Bruno Kreisky. Most of the people who support us tend to be secular. Whereas in the religious community for a variety of historical and sociological reasons, their community has been increasingly socialized into a very potent mixture of extreme nationalism and extreme particularism. The daughter of one of our Rabbis went to an orthodox youth group, met her husband to be when there was a vaguely liberal speaker and they were the only two people that clapped their hands at the end. That is anecdotal but indicative of what is happening in that society.

Rabbis for Human Rights. If our first mandate is try to prevent or to redress human rights abuses then our second and no less important mandate is to try and introduce into the intellectual universe of not only religious Israelis but also secular Israelis who for them this other nationalistic, particularistic understanding of Judaism is the authentic Judaism, because that is what they see, to introduce into people's intellectual universe that alongside this nationalistic, particularistic understanding of Judaism that there is an equally authentic, equally textually based, equally Jewish humanistic understanding of the Jewish tradition. One of my earliest memories from my first years working for Rabbis for Human Rights, that was back in 1995, in December of that year just a month after Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated we spent a morning of study at a yeshiva in the occupied territories headed by a Rabbi that had been quoted of saying that bombs to be placed at the side of the roads prevent withdrawals from territory. He is one of the Rabbis suspected – I underline suspected because it was never proven and he denies it – of having given a *halakhic*, a Jewish legal justification for the assassination itself. We spent the morning studying with the students. And then we had a roundtable discussion with the students and ourselves and this Rabbi. And the very first thing that he said, he quoted from the very first verses of *Bereshit*, of the Book of Genesis, the very verses that are the heart of what we believe in Rabbis for Human Rights, all human beings are created in God's image, and that therefore Judaism cannot and must not condone the oppression, or mistreatment ,or humiliation of any human being. So far so good. We all agree. And then we get into the details and then we get into trouble. So we are talking about the mistreatment of Palestinians in the Hebron area by soldiers, by settlers. He was saying, well, you have never seen it. Unfortunately we have. You are getting it from second and third hand, unreliable sources. And then one of his own students stood up and he said, „But Rabbi, when I was doing my own service in Hebron I saw it with my own eyes.“ At that point you could have heard a pin drop. I wish I could tell you that the end of the story was that they all signed up to become members of Rabbis for Human Rights. That did not quite happen. But that student came to see us again. And I think that we succeeded in introducing that day into people's intellectual universe another way of understanding the Tora, of understanding Judaism.

Rabbis for Human Rights was founded during the first Intifada, back in December of 1988. Remember that during the first Intifada there was much more sympathy for Palestinians among average Israelis then there has been in the second Intifada. There was not the level of violence, was not the level of terror. And many average Israelis who were not political or leftwing or activists simply felt that red lines had been crossed. And many of our current human rights organizations in Israel today were all founded in those same years during the first Intifada. Among our rabbinic colleagues there was a feeling that there needed to be a Jewish rabbinic response to what is happening in our society. Our founder, Rabbi David Forman, wrote an open letter to the chief Rabbinate at the time saying, why is it that the religious establishment seems only concerned with Sabbath observance and the Jewish dietary laws. Where are the Abraham Joshua Heschels running around this country and crying devout and speaking to some of the burning issues of our society. Rabbi Heschel, of course, was a descendant of a long line of Hassidic Rabbis, saved from the Holocaust, spent most of his career in North America, wrote amazing books which everybody should read on Jewish philosophy, and poetry, and biographies. But he did not just stay in the ivory tower. He is one of the first people to speak out about the Jews of the former Soviet Union. He was one of the people that behind the scenes led those clauses in Vatican 2 which brought about some rapprochement with the Jewish and Catholic communities worldwide. He was very active in the struggle against the Vietnam war. His picture hangs on

our wall marching with Martin Luther King. He is our role model of a Rabbi and a scholar who was also a social activist. This call met a need that many Rabbis were feeling because of the feeling that we had crossed too many red lines at that time. To this day we are the only Rabbinic organization in Israel explicitly dedicated to human rights issues, and we are the only Rabbinic organization in which orthodox, reform, conservative, reconstructionist and renewal Rabbis coexist in one organization without strangling each other. Just that should get us some points somewhere because in Israel things just don't happen that way.

Back when we first started all we had to do was show up where human rights abuses have taken place and all the press would show. It is just so unusual for Rabbis to be concerned about these kinds of issues. It is not so easy any more but over the years we received the Speaker of the Knesset Prize for our contributions to Israeli society. Last year we received the Niwano Peace Prize, some would call it the Nobel Peace Prize of the religious world for our contributions to peace in a religious context. It is chosen by an interfaith panel from religious leaders from around the world. We have been endorsed by many Rabbis and Rabbinical organizations around the world. We are at the human rights table. We are working every day with the people making policy and shaping opinion, with Ministers, the army, the press, the international diplomatic corps. We certainly don't succeed at everything we try to do but we do succeed a number of times as well. So we are at the table with all the privileges and more importantly with all the responsibilities that that entails. We work sometimes through the courts, sometimes through the press, sometimes through media campaigns, sometimes through direct field work, sometimes working with the international community, sometimes lobbying the Israeli government and the Knesset, and when all else fails through active civil disobedience. I myself was on trial a few years ago for standing in front of bulldozers that had come to demolish Palestinian homes not for any security reason, but of the Catch 22 situation in which Palestinians living in the West Bank or in Jerusalem find themselves in. You can have a clean security record. You can have an uncontested title to your land. You can stand on your head. And in most cases you cannot get a legal building permit without paying a bribe agreeing to be an informer. And then when you are forced because of an explicit politically motivated policy to manipulate zoning and building laws to make it impossible for people to get that legal permit. When you are forced to build without that permit your home is illegal and subject to demolition. Thousands have made homes that way. We over the years we were founding members of the Israeli Committee against Home Demolitions when it was a coalition. It has subsequently become a separate organization. But we succeeded in largely stopping demolitions for a number of years. But today they are definitely on the rise, particularly in Jerusalem.

Israel is a democracy. I mean that. Of course, in a democracy civil disobedience must be a matter of last resorts, not first resort. Because we have other democratic tools to try to change policy that we don't agree with. But as Rabbi Heschel would say, in a democracy a few are guilty but all are responsible. And there comes a certain point, say a policy that we thought was on its way out because there was a growing consensus that it was wrong and immoral. Seeing it come back, seeing the bulldozer tearing into that home. The father of the family clutching at his heart and starting to have a heart attack. The woman tearing at their hair, pleading with us to do something. Knowing that the worst is yet to come, the moment I would not wish on my worst enemies. And that is the moment the children come home. They went off to school, they had a home. And now there is rubble. Picking through the rubble to find a toy or a book. And the fact is, I have seen it too many times. Demolitions do not just demolish a home, they demolish a family. And the myriad of tensions that are created. The top students' grades plummet. The older children wet their bed at night rather than leave them to go to the bathroom. Children who collapse in the middle of the street with panic attacks, who no longer believe in their parents who were not able to protect them. Seeing as I did at that point the Tora which I as a Rabbi am sworn upholding being grounded into the rubble along that home and the image of god which we are committed to honor being banished from that place. There comes a certain point where one has no choice really but to stand in front of the bulldozers.

Usually these things are dismissed after a year, but this time we were put at trial. And there were some amazing moments. The fact that over 400 Rabbis from around the world signed an open letter to the Prime Minister about the demolition policy. Not an easy thing to do because we know that to be a Jewish leader abroad, whatever you may think privately, there is the concern that your works may be misused in ways you

did not intend. And it turned out that the day that I was to take the stand on my behalf fell between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The holiest time of the year for our Jewish faith. As I told the judge, from the moment I knew that this was the day that I would take the stand on my own behalf what kept on ringing through my head are those words we pray just before Kol Nidre on the evening of Yom Kippur, *B'Yeshiva shel Malla, U'V'Yehsiva shel Mata* „In the heavenly court above, in the earthly court below we pray together on this eve.“ And I asked the judge, „How can we in a few days on Yom Kippur when we believe all the world is being judged, how can we plead with God to judge us in the *Yeshiva Shel Mala*, the heavenly court, not from the throne of strict justice, but from the throne of mercy and compassion, how can we ask that of God in *Yeshiva Shel Mala*, in the Heavenly Court if in the *Yeshivot Shel Mat* in the earthly courts in which we are responsible both for justice and for mercy, if we do not the same.“ And I reminded the judge that in the Bible in original Hebrew justice and law are synonymous. Unfortunately in our world that is not so often the case. So I had the prosecuting attorney in tears that day, but the judge was the one that counted and she remained rather aloof. We were convicted although immediately unconvicted. The prosecution said that we were upstanding citizens and that the conviction should be expunged in return for community service.. But having not succeeded that day in getting justice in a court of law we went immediately from that point to lay the cornerstone of a new home in one of the villages of East Jerusalem where I had been arrested. For most of the last year I could have told you how that family with the help of Rabbis who came from around the world to rebuild that home physically were now in a home again. And I would have told you about the house warming gift that we brought for the family. A grape vine and a fig tree. In the words of the prophet: „And every person shall sit under their vine and under their fig tree and none shall make them afraid.“ That is what we want for all human beings. That no Israeli should live in fear of terror, no Palestinian should live in fear of having his home arbitrarily demolished. Unfortunately on December 12 that home was demolished again.

But the story is not over because we are doing now what we should have done years ago what I had wanted other organizations, legal departments to do. We are doing it now. We have a legal appeal not to save this house or that house or any other particular house, but about the policy itself. And for the first time ever the court has accepted a petition like this and has demanded that the municipality of Jerusalem and the Ministry of the Interior justify their policy in court, which I don't think can be justified. Right now I have one of the greatest dilemmas I had ever had. Just before leaving on this trip I was informed that the municipality of Jerusalem had contacted our lawyer to say that they want to cut a deal which means that they are concerned about this. And the deal is a tempting one. It is, I don't know how many homes in the village will be spared from demolition. So on the one hand the pass we gain of getting this policy wiped out for good, but the theoretical possibility stands against the very concrete policy of saving many homes. Of course, I cannot decide alone. We have to do that with the families. We are waiting to hear just what the details of the deal will be. But it is a terrible difficult dilemma.

Rabbis for Human Rights on principle is always involved in at least one issue dealing with the human rights of Jewish Israelis and at least one issue dealing with the human rights of non-Jews who are a part of our society. We have many projects. But the three pillars of our work are first of all education. We do educational programs with youth between high school and the army, with the army, with university students, with congregations. We believe that economic justice is a human right. I am sure many of you are familiar with the fact that the levels of poverty in the occupied territories are tremendous. A few of you may be aware of the extent of poverty in Israel. That about 20% of the Israeli elderly are chronically hungry. That somewhere between 20% and 25% of Israeli children and youth go to bed hungry at least one night a week. That somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the Israeli population is living under the poverty line. Some of this is because of globalization and other factors beyond our control. But it also is largely because of an attitude which is increasingly taking hold in Israel in which it is believed that the poorest and weakest Israelis are not only responsible for their own plight, but they are the parasites bringing down the rest of society. So we spent time lobbying with the state budget, working on the grassroots level. We are very close to cancelling a very bad program which is a carrot and stick approach to welfare. To get people off welfare into the workforce, nobody can argue with that. But this program as others around the world of its kind are basically not getting people back in the workforce but increasing poverty.

I finally figured out why they makes us Rabbis study so much Talmud. Because we have a wonderful director of our economic justice program. Her name is Rabbi Idit Lev. The Israeli budget is thousands of pages. And she has this ability to go through all these thousands of pages to figure out what it means for people, for the people in need. And more than once we have gone into progressive law makers offices, those who would be on our side, and said, do you know what you are about to vote on? And they say, no, you have to be wrong, that could not be. But Rabbi Idit Lev is always right. That way we have made lives better for many, many Israelis.

When I move across the green line into the occupied territories what would draw a threat to most of the work that we do it would be the fact that when the Oslo Accords were signed a parallel process was created. To use a good Jewish phrase, I don't necessarily believe that the Oslo Accords were born in original sin. Many Palestinians will say that they were a trap for the Palestinians. If you come to Israel and you could read Hebrew many extreme rightwing people have bumper stickers saying „“Put the Oslo criminals on trial.“ The people that signed the Oslo Accords gave the Palestinians the guns, they are now shooting at us, they should be in jail. An agreement is a piece of paper. It is as good or bad as the people who try to make it work or prevent it from being implemented. Already in back in 1993 both Israelis and Palestinians were looking forward to the final status negotiations and trying to think, how do we jockey for position. We are a human rights organization, we are not a political organization. What we do is very political, but we are not affiliated with any political party. We don't have a position to where the borders should be. We don't have a position on a one or two or a ten-state solution. We say the occupation must end, but we leave it for the politicians to define just what that is going to look like. And so we certainly recognized that the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators can negotiate as they see fit whether Arik Ascherman or anybody else from Rabbis for Human Rights likes it or not. But we began having a problem when you allow the ends to justify the means.

What was one of the basic disagreements from the very beginning of Oslo between Israelis and Palestinians? From the Palestinian point of view by signing the Oslo Accords they say, we before the negotiations even began signed away our claims to as 76% of greater Palestine. Therefore the assumption was that the remaining 24% at the end of the process will be a Palestinian state. Israelis say no, this is to be negotiated. So to this day people talk past each other. Israelis say, why are Palestinians so intransigent? Don't they understand that in negotiations you have to give and take? And Palestinians say, what are you talking about? We gave up everything before negotiations began. We went to our last ravine. We don't have anything more to give up. And people just talk past each other. So from the Israeli point of view if one of the goals was to try to hold on to as much of Area C as possible. Remember, Area A for Palestinian control under Oslo, B for Palestinian control but Israeli security control, C for Israeli control. You want to create facts on the ground. I build and expand settlements, and you want to keep the other side from doing so. So we have dealt with Palestinian groups who have been herded onto reservations to free up the rest of the land that they were living on for Jewish development.

Why this Catch 22 home demolition policy that I mentioned? It is to prevent a Palestinian presence in areas that Israel eventually wants to claim for herself. And if we were to go to visit the South Hebron hills, in the year 2007 there are people living in caves. Some of them out of poverty, some of them will tell you we built us the most beautiful house in the world, we'd rather live in a cave that we call home. All of them would rather be in those caves than out in the middle of winter, out in the fields with no roof over their heads. And that is precisely what happened in 1999 when the Israeli dispelled some 700 men, women and children from the simple caves they called home. In a wonderful victory for Israeli human rights and democracy we put together a coalition, we raised consciousness, and Israel's high court sent sent them back home. But to this day we are still fighting the government that was to reverse the decision. And you ask yourself, why? It is some hills in the middle of nowhere. Why would anybody be fighting over this land? If you look at the map you understand that you are only a few kilometers from the South border of the occupied territories near Arad and that without it you have a Palestinian free zone from the 1967 border through many of the South Hebron hill settlements up to Kiryat Arba, one of the major settlements. And sure enough we saw this later on. Every Prime Minister from Ehud Barak on has talked about redrawing the borders to keep some 80% of settlers inside Israel proper and giving back the rest. Is that a good idea or a bad idea? Again, that is beyond my

mandate. That is a political question. We can debate that. But sending some 700 men, women and children out into the cold in the name of a negotiating position, that is a human rights violation.

That brings me to the second Intifada. Few people remember if they ever knew that when the second Intifada broke out there was actually a debate between Israel's two major military intelligence agencies. The Aman said what we have all heard what the Israeli government would like us to hear, that Yassir Arafat did not get what he wanted at Camp David when he agreed to sign a peace treaty, came home and started the Intifada. The Shabak said no. They said that this was spontaneous. But frankly those of us who had been working in the field did not need to hear this debate because we have been predicting the outbreak of the second Intifada for a year and a half before it happened. Predicting does not mean condoning. Violence and terror are wrong. And I am convinced that when historians write about the second Intifada it will be seen as a setback for the Palestinian people. But why is it that we were predicting this a year and a half before it happened, if we are not going to repeat this we better learn from it. There was a debate already in the first years of Oslo between human rights organizations and some of the more progressive politicians who said, if we have to cut corners on human rights issues to get to the ultimate goal which is the peace process then so be it. They won't say that today because the reason the peace process fell apart is because in the same way as Israelis became disillusioned with the process when the Palestinian Authority was unable to stop terror, average Palestinians saw this ongoing human rights violations and said, this is not a peace process. And rightly or wrongly this is what made Palestinian society ripe for the Intifada. Now we can say if they just held on they would have got it all back. Maybe yes, maybe no. But the average Palestinian no longer believed that this was a peace process. And it is important that we remember this because some day we are going to get back to a peace process. And the question is, will we have learned anything.

Opinion polls show that there is a same majority of Israelis and Palestinians who want a negotiated compromise agreement. There is also a similar majority of Palestinians who are in favor of some level of violence so they can get Israel who would be interested in pursuing a peace process without that pressure. Palestinians will have to learn that is wrong, that violence does not promote but destroys a process. And we Israelis must understand that there is no symmetry. We are not two equal parties. We Israelis have the overwhelming economic, political, and military power. You cannot negotiate with one hand and use that overwhelming power to create facts and violate human rights with the other hand, Because that, too, will destroy a peace process. But this sounds all theoretical. Because we can talk about the past, but people are dying on both sides. The bullets are flying. So what do you do?

I often do a little exercise with Israelis. Every single Israeli school child can quote you from the Talmud where we are taught if someone is coming to kill you, you get up earlier and you kill them first. We are not a passivist religion. Bombs have gone off not far from my home. I have two little children at home. You better believe that I also want my government to do what it needs to do to stop the people that are coming to murder my children. And then I ask people how the Talmud continues. And then I get blank stares. We are taught for example: Somebody is chasing after someone with a knife to kill them. Again, you must kill the person with the knife. Not only to save the person being pursued but to save the pursuer from him or herself. But, we are taught: If you could have stopped that person by any other means, if you can have shot him in the foot, you could have shouted, and you kill them, even though you were simply trying to save a human life, you are trying to do the right thing, the Talmud says you are guilty of murder. There is doctrine of minimum necessary force. And then this text gets even higher, maybe higher than any human being can observe. We are taught about the man who comes to rob. When the same Talmudic Rabbis that a few pages earlier said if someone is going to kill you, you get up earlier to kill them first, but now the question is, the strong man in my village is coming to kill me if I don't call that inre kill that innocent third person, what shall I do? I would have had no problem had the question been, can I defend myself against the man coming to murder me? By regarding the innocent third person, he says, that you shall be killed rather than kill. Who is to say that your blood is redder than his? Even in the name of selfdefence we cannot kill innocent people. It is not easy.

Our founder, Rabbi Forman, was a soldier in the first Lebanon war. One day the commander said, look over there at the banana groves, there are Palestinians pointing RPGs at us, However, they are holding civilians in front of them, we are not going to shoot. They did not shoot and two of his army buddies were killed. To this day he says, I don't know if I did the right thing or not. How can I have shot and killed innocent people? But how can I look at the widows and say, your husband is dead because we did not shoot? And obviously you are always in a loose loose situation. And that is why peace ?are getting out of the box and are creating some positive options and not just negative options. But the point is even when we have real and legitimate selfdefence concerns there have to be red lines. The question is, where do you draw those red lines?

One of our major programs during the second Intifada is our olive tree campaign. Part of that campaign is replanting trees that have been uprooted or are in danger of expropriation as they are between the separation barrier and the green line. People hear that we are going to replant and say, are you crazy. People are shooting from behind these trees. How can go and replant those trees? Well, you have to be rather thin and emaciated to hide behind this little saplings. But more seriously, if I would take you on a tour I would show you all kinds of places where the trees have nothing to do with security. But that argument makes sense if you are sitting in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, let alone in Vienna or in New York. You have to see it to understand it. And if that is a hard line to draw intellectually let's talk about it emotionally. Another part of our campaign is that we literally send out volunteers to act as human shields to protect Palestinians from settler violence when they go to harvest their olives, or to plow, or to plant, or to prune. Palestinians and those of us who are trying to protect them are being shot at, beaten, threatened, attacked, stoned, you name it. And Israeli security forces are either not showing up, or coming late, or standing by. As a result of our sitting down and engaging the security forces and putting on pressure and eventually going to Israel's high court we had a decision in our favor this last June, saying that the army was not doing enough to allow Palestinians to get to their land, to protect them, to protect the trees, to bring people to justice that they attack. Things are much better today.

Two weeks ago, just before leaving for this trip, I was myself attacked by settlers. We were helping shepherds from a village in the South Hebron hills to try to bring their sheep to graze on lands not far from a settlement. Settlers showed up with their dogs. I am dealing with one settler who is trying to shoo away the sheep. I get a call to come back quickly because there is violence. This one settler who was a raving maniac had already injured one of my volunteers, was smashing hammers, and slapping me, and attacking me, threatening to murder my family. And I am trying to keep non-violent but to keep him away from everybody else until the police finally get there. In our weekly cycle of Tora readings in the Jewish tradition two weeks ago we read Leviticus 19, which teaches us about loving one's neighbors oneself, of loving a stranger, of not standing idly by when your neighbor bleeds. I sat in Synagogue the next day, and that is also a portion we read every year in the same week that we have Israel's independence day. I was thinking how many of these commandments were violated on this day. But on the whole we are in a better situation than we were certainly in 2002.

But often even when we have agreed with the senior commanders of what is going to happen on any given day. I meet angry foot soldiers. Why does my commander say my job this day is to protect Palestinians? Who knows how many among them has lost an army buddy or a loved one and they say, I have to protect THEIR human rights? That is an emotionally impossible thing to ask of anybody. And you can pick at the parallels from the Palestinian side. But that is what you have to do. There is a form of Jewish commentary on the Tora in the Bible where we are taught, remember the story that Hagar and Ishmael are banished into the desert are dying of thirst. According to the Tora God helps them. Before God prepares the well the angels come and say, what are you doing. Don't you know all the trouble that you are going to cause the Jewish people? Why don't you just let them die, end it all right here? God says no. Right now in front of me is an innocent child. And we, too, who are created in God's image and therefore commanded to be as God like as humanly possibly, we, too, have to distinguish between the terrorist coming to murder my family and the family who simply wants to put a roof over their heads or harvest their olives.

And finally, it all comes down to hope. Because for the last six and a half years Israelis and Palestinians have been living without hope. The same opinion polls that I mentioned before that there is a same majority on

both sides who want to negotiate peace, there is even a larger majority on both sides that says, we want peace, the other sides doesn't. I said before that there is no symmetry. But is remarkable how similar we are, that we all on both sides say, there is nobody to talk to on the other side. It is amazing how we are so symmetrical and we all so much see ourselves as the victims that we cannot imagine that one can be a victim and a victimizer at the same time. We get outraged if anyone says that we are victimizers. We are the victims, how can we be the victimizers? There is a commentary by a late 19th, early 20th century Rabbi .Tamerat who said, why were the children of Israel commanded to stay in their homes as the Angel of Death went over Egypt? Because, he said, even when your cause is just any contact with violence corrupts. And the difference between being a victim and a victimizer is less than a hair breath

So if everybody believes that nobody on either side wants peace what is the incentive to take any risks for peace? If I said before that our first mandate is to prevent human rights abuses, our second to introduce into people's intellectual universe people another way of understanding Torah, the most important thing we do is to restore hope. I was once sitting with Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish,, the spiritual founder of the Islamic movement inside Israel. He said, we should send interfaith groups to both sides with the simple message to the leadership on both sides, empower us. We Israelis can speak about peace and human rights till we are blue in the face, and if God forbid a bomb blows up tomorrow in a bus, we will have somewhere between a million and two million Israelis like we did this summer in the North, fleeing their homes to bomb shelters under a rain of missiles, who is going to listen? And Palestinian peace makers can talk about peace and human rights till they are blue in the face, and if we have shells wiping out entire families in Gaza, and some 1.200 civilians dead in Lebanon, who is going to listen? And so we are dependent on each other.

Only I as an Israeli, particularly a religious Israeli, can break the stereotypes that so many Palestinians have of Israelis, thereby empowering Palestinian peace makers to be heard by their own people. And only Palestinians can empower me. I don't know how many times when I have gone in an act of civil disobedience to rebuild a demolished home and the Palestinian parents have insisted to bring their children to meet us. The same conversation time after time. Our ten year old son has just seen his home demolished before his eyes, his parents humiliated in front of his eyes. What do we say to our ten year old who says I want to grow up and be a terrorist? We want them to know that not every Israeli comes with guns to demolish their homes, that there are Israelis who come and stand shoulder to shoulder with them to rebuild their homes.“ Why is it that we correctly get upset when we hear about propaganda being taught in Palestinian schools about Israelis? Because we know that even if we reach the perfect peace treaty tomorrow, if we continue to teach hate about each other that treaty can not last. So rather than curse the darkness and complain about what is being taught in Palestinian schools, what are we doing to empower the Palestinian parents who want their child to know something else about Judaism and about Israelis? I certainly think that what we are doing is the just, and the right, and the Jewish thing to do. But frankly, it is a self interested thing to do. It is the single best thing I can do to protect my children both morally and physically. The real Zionism today is working for an Israel which is not only physically strong, but is morally strong and lives up to our highest Jewish values.

One more story. April 15, 2004, I was in the village of Bido, one of the eight villages that was part of this amazing high court appeal by Palestinian villages. What the Israeli high court ruled was that yes, we have a right to defend ourselves, we have the right to build a separation barrier, but the route of the barrier as we are now building it is unnecessarily, and disproportionately violating Palestinian human rights and international law. That send the army back to the drawing board. Unfortunately when the army came back from the drawing board, the court does not sufficiently stuck to its own principles. But on this particular day, after this demonstration I get a phone call. I am called to come quickly to another neighborhood because a thirteen year old boy who has been caught by the border police was beeing beaten. I and two other Israelis are making our way a couple of hundred meters to where these jeeps are, the border police start shooting tear gas at us. The other two Israelis go back, and I am the only one stupid enough to keep on going forward. I get there. The commander beckons me then grabs me by the throat, shakes me violently, head butts me, starts screaming, you are arrested. I did not know why I was arrested but I certainly knew at that point that I was arrested. I see the young boy strapped to the jeep, shivering in fear, unsuccessfully trying to hold back the tears. Another adult was handcuffed and put to a second jeep, the same was done to me. Youth start throwing

stones, hitting these jeeps that were positioned in front of and for the next couple of hours were basically used as human shields. All my protests not to use us as human shields, to move us are all met with either threats or with laughter and derision.

Why do I finish with this story? For two reasons. These pictures appeared around the world. And we are not shy at all about working with the press. But , I nevertheless began to feel uncomfortable because I felt that reporters were obsessing on this. As terrible as it was, it is not like this only could happen in Israel. Think of the experiments done in Stanford University back in the 1970's where you took arbitrarily a group of students, make half of them guards, half of them prisoners. They had to stop the experiment after a day because the people who arbitrarily become guards became so brutal and sadistic. Two weeks after this incident all the reports about Abu Ghraib in Iraq started coming out. So as someone who spends almost every waking hour fighting Israeli injustice and human rights violations, I also want to say very clearly that we have to avoid double standards. But the other reason that I finish with this story is because who knows what psychological scars that young boy is going to have for the rest of his life? Who knows what he is thinking about all Israelis, perhaps all Jews? However when he gave an affidavit to our fellow human rights organization - after describing all the horrific things that happened to him he concluded by saying "A tall Jewish man in a Kippah came to my rescue and told me not to be afraid."

Friends, the work that we do is not fun. As an Israeli, as a Rabbi, as a Jew, as a Zionist I have no great pleasure dealing day in and day out with the deepest, darkest corners of the country that I love, the country that I live in, the country that I have chosen to raise a family in. I would be a happier man if I did not know a fraction of what I know. But when you know you have a choice. You can hide your head in the sand or you can take the pain that you feel knowing that things are happening in your country that you would not want to believe possible, and use that pain to move us forward , to spur us into being God's partners in making this a better world. And the work has its risks. I have been beaten up on many occasions by Israeli security forces. I have been attacked on a number of occasions by settlers. And its equal opportunity out there. I have had my car stoned by Palestinians as well. But I do that again again, and again, and again for the young boy who will say that „A tall Jewish man in a Kippah came to my rescue and told me not to be afraid.“ Because if there is going to be any hope for any of us, if there is going to be hope for that young boy's children and mine, if there is going to be hope for that coalition of hope which must be forged, if we are going to move forward, that is the only, only way. Thank you.

Question

It is high time to make peace with Palestine. It is really high time to treat them as equals. They are equally intelligent. They have the same needs and the same love.

Question

My name is Claudia Colledi. I am working on a thesis on Palestine which will be about much more states philosophy and nation building and on economics. You are actually a clergy man or a missionary. As you all might know in Israel everybody has to serve three years in the army, starting from his 17th birthday. You are to be a trustworthy partner to young people and to people who are traumatized by suicide attacks or by war experiences. What do you do on the spot? Because as a missionary you have to be on spot if something happens anywhere and you will face the problem that people who are traumatized will really need a psychiatric treatment or a medical treatment. How do you deal with that? I am always interested in figures. I would like to know how many really traumatized people of Israel do you reach? You were saying you are trying to educate people, but it is really difficult to educate somebody who is traumatized.

Arik Ascherman

I agree with you that it is hard to educate someone who is traumatized. We certainly when we are dealing with either traumatized Israelis or Palestinians do not give them a lecture like you heard tonight. We don't start lecturing on the finer points of Jewish tradition. It is a listening ear and being there by example. For many people just knowing that there is another side of Jewish tradition just by our presence sometimes is a comforting thing. People tell us you are saving Judaism for us. The fact is there is nobody in our region either

Israeli or Palestinian who is not traumatized to some degree. There is nobody in our region who doesn't know somebody personally who has been killed. There was a book written a number of years ago about the Middle East entitled Wounded Spirits in the Promised Land. We are all wounded spirits. How many people we actually reach? It is hard to give you numbers. When we are featured on either Israeli or Palestinian television who knows how many people are at least getting a message that there is another Jewish way, another Israeli way directly. In our economic justice work we affect a small number of people directly in Hadera and a harder to determine number when we change a budget line item. However, my aim is that we change people's attitudes. Over the Green Line, we work in some 40 Palestinian villages all year round to help people access their agricultural land. It is hard to give a hard number. But over the years it is certainly thousands and thousands of people.

Question

In your statement which you distributed here it says, we call upon our government to end the limitations placed upon the press. Now you are talking about the press containing Gideon Levy, Amira Hass etc. What are these limitations which you want to end on the Israeli press which seems to be rather free? You have repeatedly said how similar the Israelis and the Palestinians are. In Iraq Muslims are killing other Muslims by the thousands. Can you tell me when have Israelis killed each other? When have Israelis gassed Israeli children the way Muslims in Iraq gas Muslim children? And can you tell us about Israeli suicide terrorists?

Arik Ascherman

If you look that date of that statement it was in 2002. As I said in my talk Israel has very great freedom of the press. In 2002 when the statement was written there were very disturbing signs that there the head of the Israeli broadcasting association was trying to dictate to the radio who they interview and what terms to use. But overall you are correct that there is a very high level of freedom of the press in Israel on the whole. There were some warning signs at the time when this was written.

I don't believe in moral comparisons. I said certain things are very similar, other things are not. The fact is I as an Israeli and I as a Jew am concerned about what my people are doing, what my army is doing, and the violations and the desecration of the Tora which I am sworn to uphold. It doesn't really matter to me. Maybe here when we are sitting in Austria which is different than sitting in Jerusalem it is important to recall that there are human rights abuses that go on around the world. That is precisely why, as I mentioned when talking about double standards and I criticized some of these reporters that were making too much a deal of these human shields events, but the fact that other people do it is very cold comfort because it is not what I was taught that my people are supposed to do, and it is not what my Tora and my religion tells us we are supposed to do. And my job first and foremost is to deal with what my fellow Jews and my fellow Israelis do. I would agree with you that there are other parts of the world where things as bad or worse are happening.

Question

Susi Shaked. I am representing the Austrian Friends of the Hadassah Hospitals in Jerusalem. I was greatly impressed by the story about the kid because we are working very closely together with the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Israel. We are training one single Palestinian psychiatrist from Gaza. I hear that it also affects the Israeli kids very greatly. I hear from the head of the psychiatric department that the amount of suicides amongst the kids, both Arab and Israelis, is much larger in the last years than it was before.

Arik Ascherman

I wasn't aware of that statistics. But it makes sense. In Israel which has maybe more resources than the Palestinian Authority or the Palestinian society in general there are a number of programs like the one that you helped to sponsor, summer camps and other programs for children who have been the victims of terror attacks, lost loved one, had been harmed themselves. But there is much more that needs to be done because on both sides the trauma is intense. Even when we will sign a peace treaty there will be a lot of healing that will have to happen on both sides because of that drama that has been going on for over a hundred years.

Question

What do you think could Jews and should Jews do outside of Israel to promote peace?

Arik Ascherman

There are a number of things that can be done. We ask interested people to write letters either to the Israeli government or perhaps your government here. It is in some ways a more complicated proposition to be here where I know it can be a sensitive situation where the criticism we and others make about Israel in a loving way may be twisted or used by others who don't have Israel's best interests at heart. But I think that it is crucial, of course, beyond the obvious things like financial support, for people to come, to volunteer, to educate yourselves, to learn, to be people that come back to your community having seen all sides, to be able to talk about what is happening. And then advocate. The fact is the Israeli government does take notice of what Jews around the world think and say. Even though the European Union has a very negative image in Israel, it nevertheless has influence, is major trading power, part of the quartet. So it is very important. And many times in terms of internal politics your voice is important. Your governments are being lobbied every day by people that maybe don't care whether Israel exists tomorrow or not. But to hear from the people from the Jewish community that support Israel, that want the state for its own good to be a better place, to be a more just place because it is also in their self interest, that is a message which governments may not hear often enough.

Question

My name is Gerda Frey. I represent the NGO the International Council of Jewish Women in Vienna. I very much respect what you are doing. I think it is wonderful to have this love for humanity for the encompassing humanity. But do you think that teaching Israelis and having influence on Israelis will change the atmosphere of the Islamic world, of Iran, of all the hatred, of the sea that Israel is surrounded by? Do you think that they will take into account that no houses will be demolished? I very much feel for the people whose houses are demolished. But have you ever read what Ahmadinejad had been saying these last years? Are you aware of the hatred? The question of Palestine is the ring that is holding together the Muslim world. Do you think Indonesians really care what the Palestinian kid feels but they are paying lip service. I don't know if you have discussed politics? I did in Egypt. I have seen such unbelievable hatred from each side. I just believe that if we go out and try to tell the Israelis don't be unfair, don't be this and don't be that, that this will change maybe some few people's lives and will change people into Rabbis as you are. But I don't believe that the world picture and the dangers that Israel is facing and your children are facing, that this is going to be helped by anything.

Arik Ascherman

That is a good question. I am not very thrilled at the prospect of a Iran with nuclear weapons on our doorstep. Many Palestinians when they are being honest will say that many of their so called friends in the Arab world really don't care about them at all. But on the other hand, as it was brought out by the Iraq Study Group in the United States, the fact is that even if it is just lip service, the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict is for the masses, even it is being cynically exploited by the leaders, is a flashpoint. But even if changing the way Palestinians and Israelis look at each other does not change what happens in Iran or in Malaysia it is important in and of itself, for our own spiritual wellbeing.

I tell you another story. Some years ago I was in the village of Beit Furik It is next to the settlement Itamar. I don't like stereotypes of anybody including settlers, but if you are looking to find your stereotypical violent, fanatic settlers, this is a good place to find them. We were going out with some of the villagers. But other people are running away. I am coming from the village with the Palestinians. They see me with the Kippah and they know that on previous day the people from Itamar have been playing a particular nasty trick where they let people harvest to about midday and then they come and attack and steal all the olives that they worked hard all the morning to pick. But eventually we are working. And I am little bit surprised, to put it mildly, when I find out that the young man that I am working with is taking off time from his normal job to help his family. He was at the time part of Yassir Arafat's presidential guard. If I am a little bit blown away to find out that I am working with someone from the presidential guard this young man is ten times

more blown away to find out that he is working with an Israeli Rabbi. He asks me, "I don't understand why you are here. This makes no sense, explain it to me." So I started talking to him about the Jewish tradition of peace, and of human rights, and justice. He said, "for us Palestinians there is no justice." Although we were still a number of months away from our Jewish holiday of Hanukkah I told him a lesson from that holiday where I said, when all is dark we have to start by lighting that first candle. I don't know what that candle that we light in that village will do in Iran. But that young man went to excitedly repeat this to his family.

I am not naïve. I don't know what that young man has done since or what he may do tomorrow when he is confronted with an ethical choice. But even if I am not sure that I did any good I certainly know that I didn't do any harm. And I certainly know there is a much greater chance that that young man will choose the path of non-violence having had that experience than had he not had that experience. And that is enough for me.

Question

Maybe one more point on demolition policy. That is where I disagree a little bit with what you said. We have first of all to differentiate demolition in a war action and deliberate demolition that was done by the Israeli military when they drew back from Gaza Strip. You said that you disagree with the Israeli demolition policy. In this respect I want to say that the houses that were actually demolished by the military, this was not just a deliberate demolition just for fun, but it was because the Palestinians demanded it because they did not want to live in the houses of the Israelis, not because of hatred, but they did not want to live there because they simply have another architecture.

Arik Ascherman

We do not talk about the demolition of the homes of settlers in Gaza after the withdrawal. As you correctly pointed out the Palestinians said, "We don't want them." When I try to differentiate I talk about three different kinds of home demolitions. You bring up a fourth kind. There are the homes that get demolished as acts of war, maybe even inadvertently. There was a policy of demolishing homes of terrorists or families who were suspected terrorists as a deterrent. But the Israeli army stopped that policy because these bright people finally figured out that they were actually creating more suicide bombers and it was creating more hatred. The army itself stopped that policy for that reason. Most of the demolitions that we deal with are what I call administrative demolitions where the Palestinian homes were demolished because they don't have a building permit. And it becomes a human rights issue because they did not have a fair and equal chance to get that permit.

I will come back to the thing of lighting one candle. You look at the situation that we are facing, it looks kind of intractable and hopeless sometimes. Some of you may listen to all this and say "A plague on both your houses." To do the work that we, do there is no question that you have to have a certain predilection for beating your head against the wall. But our Talmud has a wonderful image where we are taught to look at all of life on both the personal and the cosmic levels as two perfectly balanced scales. That is both a responsibility and a comfort, as it all also means that we never know in what little act that we take that seems meaningless, pointless, irrelevant at the time, whether that will be the act that tips those scales one way or the other. It is my parting hope, and wish, and prayer, and blessing for all of us, whether it be the Middle East, or in the other spheres of our personal, public, and spiritual lives that we should always have the courage, and the wisdom, and the faith to tip the scales in the right direction. Thank you.