

Why Rabbis for Human Rights was selected to receive the 23rd Niwano Peace Prize

The tragic situation in the Middle East is in the hearts of everyone concerned with peace and justice. At the core of the conflict stands the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Among the many religiously based organizations committed to promoting ideals of human rights, justice and compassion for all the people in the region, Rabbis for Human Rights holds a unique position. It brings together more than 130 Reform, Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbis and rabbinical students in a committed fellowship for justice and reconciliation. Their lofty goal is to be the rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel, promoting justice and freedom while campaigning against discrimination and inhuman conduct.

The organization, Rabbis for Human Rights, is built on, and promotes, concepts and values which are central to Jewish tradition and law. These ideals are often marginalized in a search for legitimate “security” and “safety” which, in many cases, does not honor the equally legitimate rights of “the other.” The organization was founded as a not-for-profit organization in 1988 in response to serious abuses of the human rights of Palestinians by Israel’s military authorities in their attempt to suppress the first Intifada. It represented a reaction to the indifference of many of the country’s religious leaders and citizens to the suffering of innocent people seen as “the enemy.”

As a rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel, Rabbis for Human Rights is not affiliated with any political party or political ideology. It has many volunteers and its members are Israeli citizens. Basing itself on a central pillar of Judaism—the dignity of every human being—it decries the denial of Palestinian rights to land, freedom of movement, and the lack of adequate access to livelihood, health care and education. Although focusing specifically on Palestinian human rights as a measure of Jewish ethical behavior, it also concerns itself with the rights and dignity of other groups, such as foreign workers and Ethiopian Jews. It is devoted to championing the equal status of women. Among many issues on its agenda, it is engaged in improving Israel’s health system for those who lack adequate access to it. It advocates an Israeli bill of rights as a guarantee for all citizens regardless of ethnic or religious identity or national provenance.

The premise of its actions is that by following Jewish teaching which calls for love of one’s neighbor, justice, and compassion, greater security and safety for all the inhabitants of the region will be achieved rather than the reverse. It reminds and demonstrates, to both the religious and non-religious sectors of the Israel public, a face of Judaism that sees the divine image in all human beings. It is convinced that human rights abuses are not compatible with the age-old Jewish tradition of moral responsibility for the Biblical care for “the stranger in your midst.”

Rabbis for Human Rights has received the “Speaker of the Knesset Award” for Quality of Life in the field of “Enhancing the Rule of Law and Democratic values, Protecting Human rights, and Encouraging Tolerance and Mutual Respect.”

Activities of Rabbis for Human Rights are in four main fields: education, non-violent fieldwork, legal campaigns and interfaith activities. The organization serves as an important information outlet

on human rights in Israel and the territories and publishes books and articles for the education of the public at large.

Through its various programs the organization takes a practical approach to the challenges facing individuals, groups and the whole state of Israel.

In the area of education it offers, through its Human Rights Yeshiva (seminary), a program combining weekly study and volunteer fieldwork for Israeli university students promoting Jewish values in defense of human rights. It conducts seminars and programs for pupils in religious, secular and Arab schools. It offers programs in pre-army preparatory establishments, symposia in teachers' colleges and field seminars

Rabbis for Human Rights is recognized for its non-violent fieldwork, rebuilding destroyed homes, helping Palestinians retain their farm land and harvest produce such as olives. It has been instrumental in planting or providing over 10,000 trees for Palestinian land, and it assists Palestinians who have no access to markets to sell olive oil.

In one of the most contentious issues in present day Israeli politics, Rabbis for Human Rights is working with a coalition of organizations opposing the so-called "Separation Barrier" where it expropriates lands, cuts people off from their fields, and divides or surrounds villages.

The Humanitarian Fund of the organization provides financial assistance to Israeli terror victims and donates food, medicine and other critical supplies to Arabs in the territories. Working with the The Hotline for Migrant Workers and Kav LaOved (worker's hotline), it promotes and protects the basic civil and human rights of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of Israel's labor force, including migrant workers, indentured employees, ethnic minorities, people employed via sub-contractors and victims of human trafficking. It is working with the Jahalin Bedouin including organizing English tutoring by volunteers for their youth and providing advice and support for families in distress.

In the area of legal work, Rabbis for Human Rights has launched appeals to change administrative policies on building licenses for Palestinians. It has won a High Court appeal which forced the army to allow Palestinian farmers to work on their lands. And it has ongoing appeals to the High Court in relation to violations of the human rights of Israeli Arab and West Bank Palestinians

Interfaith activities include joint declarations of Jewish, Islamic and Christian leaders, an ongoing dialogue with the Presbyterian Church of America, and teacher training sessions on human rights with Jewish and Islamic scholars. Women's interfaith dialogue is an important element in its program.

At a time when religious fundamentalism and extremism receives so much publicity in the Middle East, with its Niwano Peace Prize, the Niwano Peace Foundation wants to honor Rabbis for Human Rights as a unique voice of compassion, care for the other, love and justice that is at the heart of Judaism and indeed of all other religions.