

The 23rd Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony

Commemorative Address

Presented by
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It is a great honour to accept the 2006 Niwano Peace Prize for Rabbis for Human Rights. We feel today both pride and humility before you who have chosen our organisation, and before God. I think we have the right to feel proud of our accomplishments, small as they may be in a region and a world that is still battered by inhuman conduct. Yet we are humbled by all that remains to be done and by the knowledge that we have not acted and cannot act alone. We are thankful for the recognition you have afforded us. Receiving the Niwano Prize encourages, and indeed enables us to do more. May we, with the help of Heaven, dedicate ourselves to human rights and peace with renewed vigour of spirit and strength of heart.

The Hebrew name of Rabbis for Human Rights is Shomrei Mishpat, which means guardians of Justice, coming from the words of the Biblical prophet Isaiah: "Happy are those who guard justice, who do right at all times." What is the meaning of guardianship?

A story tells of a king who called to him two of his trusted advisors and gave to each of them a bushel of wheat, saying: I am going on a long journey – I wish you to guard these for me until I return. One of the advisors immediately ordered to have made the strongest and safest box into which he carefully placed the wheat, and then he locked it with a special gold key which he kept with him at all times. The other advisor however, took the wheat and beat out the grains, some he planted and some he had ground into fine flour. When the king returned, the second advisor was able to greet him with a fresh baked loaf of succulent bread, and to show him a beautiful, growing, golden field, but the first advisor had nothing but the wheat with which he started.

A Rabbi is a Jew who has studied much in the formative Jewish texts and codes of law and custom, and leads his or her fellow Jews in learning and understanding, in prayer and in ritual and Jewish doing. There are many who believe that the job of a rabbi is to preserve Jewish tradition, and that the only way to do this is through study and through stringently observance of the laws and rituals, the daily and weekly and yearly cycles of celebration and remembrance and prayer. These are indeed important tasks of the rabbi, and all Jews, and they are indeed a part of what the members of Rabbis for Human Rights do, each to the best of our own understanding, but they cannot preserve Judaism alone; they are a dry bushel of wheat.

The importance of study is that it teaches how to act. The importance of prayer and ritual is in focusing our spiritual lives to lead us in our daily interactions with the rest of humanity. A Jew cannot live Jewishly alone, without a congregation, a community. Human interaction is our growing golden field. The codes of Jewish law, from the Bible onwards, give us much guidance in how to behave to our fellow person, and these are things that are best preserved not by locking ourselves away in our houses of study and prayer, but by taking active part in the life of our community, our nation, our world. Our guardianship must be one of doing. This is the great strength, and the great challenge of Rabbis for Human Rights. We study and we teach – we are running programmes for teachers, for schoolchildren, for soldiers, for students that help them internalise the connection between Jewish tradition and Human Rights. We also learn and teach with leaders of other faiths, often finding that differing traditions can nonetheless have much in common. We also act: we lobby and protest against economic policies that are detrimental to the poor and unemployed, to the elderly and the sick. We work to empower those affected by these policies to help themselves and those around them. We accompany Palestinian farmers to their lands when they are threatened by violence on the part of some Jews who think that Judaism is only about Jewish rights, particularly rights to the Land of Israel, and we petition the courts to assure that agricultural access be allowed and protected. We rebuild homes and replant trees. We visit victims of terror. We deliver humanitarian aid. We argue and rethink. We manage to hold together the only organisation in Israel that includes orthodox and non-orthodox rabbis of a variety of denominations – that in and of itself is, I think, worthy of a peace prize! Values can only be preserved by fulfilling them. The Jewish values of justice and equality of all people must be guarded through our action and study together. This is the meaning of Shomrei Mishpat.

In Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Sages (2:15) we learn: Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short and the work is very much, the workers are lazy, the reward is very great and the Master of the House is pressing.

The day is short and the work is very much: Often we can be overwhelmed by all the work there is to be done on issues of Human rights in Israel and the territories it controls – the abuses are many and often we can feel that the time is running out – this is particularly true on the individual level: the single mother who has no food for her children, the pregnant woman at the checkpoint, the soldier with his finger on the trigger – for all these the day is indeed very short, and answers must be given, solutions found, help offered now. Also on the larger stage we can feel that the clock is ticking – if human rights abuses in the Territories continue to escalate, the outlook is grim for both Israelis and Palestinians, as terror is all too likely to show its ugly and brutal face more often. If terror - perhaps one of the most awful abuses of the right to life - continues, then more Israelis will feel that all Palestinians, all Arabs are enemies, and act accordingly. If the weak and poor continue

to be pushed aside and denied rights to a dignified living, the society is in danger of economic and moral collapse. The day is short; the work must be done now. How difficult for us then to engage in long term planning – educating future leaders and soldiers, and the public at large, is a slow process. Interfaith discussions, empowerment training, the slow growth of an olive tree – these are things that take time. And yet they must be done.

Every member of Rabbis for Human Rights acts out of a boundless love for Israel – the people, the land, and the State. We pray and we act in order to make the people of Israel a light unto the nations, the Land of Israel a house of prayer for all people and the State of Israel a model of social justice that does not oppress the orphan, the widow and the stranger, a responsible democracy, striving toward the prophetic vision: nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Some accuse us of being unrealistic idealists. To them we reply in the words of Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism: “If you will it, it is no dream”. And others accuse us of undermining the State when we criticise its actions and policies. To them we reply in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “In a democratic society some are guilty, but all are responsible”. If we do not decry the abuses of power and the injustices of our country, then they will remain with us, destroying our society from within much more effectively than any enemy without. And we do have enemies. The State of Israel and the Jewish people are still objects of hate for some individuals and nations. Terrorism poses a very real threat to Jews, to Israelis, and it is the responsibility of the State to do all that it can to protect its people. Yet our tradition teaches that justice must be reached by just means. The careful balance between security for Israelis and fairness toward Palestinians and the rights of both to self-determination and most importantly to life, cannot be treated lightly. The day is short, both sides need solutions soon, and the work is very much.

The workers are lazy: it is painful to admit, but we are not doing all we can. And here the “we” is a number of circles of people: the staff of Rabbis for Human Rights indeed do all that they can, with limited time and budgets, but the membership, the people whose names are on our lists are not active enough, often enough; we need to work to see that the incredible things that we can do are indeed realized, that we take pride and take part! The wider circle is our friends, supporters and partner organisations – without them, we would not be able to do much – we would not have people to accompany Palestinian farmers to their fields, to interview families whose homes are threatened with destruction; we would not have people to hand out rights-brochures to the unemployed, we would not have letters written to Members of Knesset and Members of the American and other governments decrying human rights abuses, we would not have the legal, organisational and field experience that other groups give in the joint struggle for equity, and we would not have the finances to help victims of terror, victims of violence, and so many others who need our help. And yet there is more that could be done. We need to learn to better activate our volunteers, work with other organisations and not replicate work that they do, to motive donors to become letter writers, letter writers to become activists, and activists to become more dedicated. A wider circle yet is the Israeli public: they do not hear our voice often enough, loud enough when we cry for a State which is just and also Jewish, because to be just without Judaism is not the reason the State was founded, and to be Jewish without justice is a perversion of Judaism, and of the State. We praise the Holy One who gives strength to the weary and we dedicate ourselves again to overcoming our laziness, and to energising our partners in the sacred work we do because:

The reward is very great: (here I'm not talking about the prize, although that too is very great and will help us to maintain both body and soul of our organization, to increase our doing and to enrich our feeling of spiritual well-being in knowing that our work is appreciated). The true reward of our work is the work itself. When we are able to change government economic decrees, when we are able to rescue a home, or provide the physical and legal protection for Palestinian farmers to work their lands, we feel greatly rewarded. And even when we do not attain all our goals, we are rewarded by the smiles of our partners, the respect of those for whom we have tried to make a difference. Often, although we have not succeeded in causing a drastic change of the situation, we know that we have changed hearts and minds – we have shown Palestinians that there are Jews, Israelis, Rabbis – who care about their welfare and are not prepared to sit quietly when their rights are abused by our government or our fellow citizens – we have shown secular Jewish Israelis that Judaism has a message of peace and human respect and that there are rabbis whose concern is the Palestinian's body, and the foreign worker's wallet, as well as the Jew's soul. We have worked side-by-side with Palestinians and seen their humanity with our own eyes. Rabbi Arik Ascherman, our executive director often tells of the Arab villagers who bring their children to meet him, to show them a caring Israeli Jew. My own son, who is four, was filmed for both Israeli and Palestinian television as he helped plant olive trees with Palestinians on the Jewish holiday of Tu BiShvat, the "birthday of the trees." What greater reward can there be than planting the seeds of hope in future generations?

The Master of the House is pressing: Rabbis for Human Rights came into being because as rabbis, as religious Jews, we must work for human rights. It is our calling. God is the Creator of the world and all that is in it, and therefore God is the Ruler, who commands and demands. God saved the Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish people, from slavery and in doing so enabled us, as free people, to follow God's laws. God demands of us to love our neighbour, and also to love the stranger. God requires us to emulate God's qualities – visiting the sick, clothing the naked. God commands us to seek peace and pursue it. God expects us to feel the joy and also the pain of others. God created within us the ability to change our environment and ourselves. It is not enough to pray that God send healing to our battered nation and world, unless we, too, can make the effort to be God's partners in the work of repair.

Rabbis for Human Rights was founded in 1988. Today Rabbis for Human Rights is 18 years old. In Jewish tradition, the number 18 holds special significance, for written in Hebrew letters it spells the word "chai" – life. 18 years ago, Rabbis for Human Rights was a small circle of dedicated colleagues, and now we number over 100 members and a growing, and very talented staff in Israel and have sister organisations in other countries and thousands of friends and supporters in Israel and around the world. We have indeed added to the life of our organisation, yet our goal has always been to act for life on behalf of those whose rights to life, livelihood and dignity are abused. Jewish tradition teaches that human life is immeasurably precious and that one who saves even a single human life is to be considered as one who has saved the entire world, for, as we learn in the very beginning of the Bible, a single human was created by God and from that first being, all humanity descended. We do not know the colour of that being's skin or hair, the shape of its nose or eyes – one tradition tells that God took dust of different colours from all the corners of the earth with which to make this first human – and another tradition says that this creature was both male and female - but we do know that it contained a God-like soul, an unquenchable divine spark, for it was

created in God's image, and that image remains in all its descendants, in every human creature – no matter their race or gender, no matter their beliefs, no matter their abilities.

This is the quintessential basis of religious human rights. This, the first of our texts, teaches us categorically that all humans have infinitesimal, God given value and that therefore it is our divinely mandated responsibility to respect each and every human and ensure their rights. Humans are created in God's image and therefore have inalienable rights. Humans are created in God's image and therefore have irrevocable responsibilities.

All too often, particularly in the Middle East, religion is seen to be the problem, and not the answer to the violence and the denial of human rights. Fundamentalists on all sides claim that right, and rights, belong only to those who follow their beliefs. They claim God as their exclusive property, and therefore God's favours, too, are theirs alone – the land, the law, the right to life. All too often secular humanists reject all religion as the basis of inequality between people, between peoples and as being out of touch with modern realities. Yet it is the task of all people of faith to speak out against both the rejectionism and the fundamentalism, and to stress the values of truth, justice and peace that must be the basis for a true relationship with the Holy and with all creation. 'The world exists because of three things, because of truth and because of judgement and because of peace.' (Pirkei Avot)

Hans Kung, the previous recipient of the Niwano prize suggests that we should re-understand the Biblical commandment 'Thou shalt not murder', in positive terms, as 'Have respect for life,' which calls for the safety of all minorities, social and political justice, a culture of non-violence, and respect for the environment. This is a beautiful example of the way that religion can speak to the real issues of today's world, leading us away from particularistic and fundamentalist "religiosity" and directing our feet to paths of respect for all creation. Such paths lead us to actions like that of our sister organisation, Rabbis for Human Rights-NA in their work to eradicate government-sanctioned torture.

Life is the most precious gift of God, the Source of Life. In this, our 18th year, our year of chai, of life, we commit ourselves above all to sanctifying life and helping shape a society in which life flourishes.

As Rabbis for Human Rights receives the Niwano Peace Prize today we receive it also in the name of those who are our partners, our supporters, religious and non-religious, Jewish and non-Jewish, who have worked, dreamed, studied and prayed with us. We accept this prize in the name of all those whose examples and teachings throughout the generations light our path. And we dedicate this prize to those who are suffering, to the victims of human rights abuses, who we will do our utmost to help, strengthened now by your recognition. We must thank Rabbi David Forman, our founder and first chairperson and all those who established our organisation, and Rabbi Ascherman, our tireless and fearless executive director, and all our truly dedicated staff. And above all we must thank the Holy One of Blessing who has given us the opportunity and ability to do this holy work, and we must pray: umaase yadeinu konena aleinu – may You establish the work of our hands.