

# T'RUAH Human Rights Heroes



## RUCHAMA MARTON



Dr. Ruchama Marton, the founder and president of Physicians for Human Rights—Israel (PHR), says she was educated to be humble. “Starting a sentence with ‘I’ was impossible. A good girl simply doesn’t say ‘I did this.’” But now she is coming to realize that, as a result, many stories remain hidden that ought to be part of the public narrative.

“I’m not really an Israeli,” says Marton, who was born in Jerusalem before the establishment of the State of Israel. “I mean, obviously I am, by passport, by language, by part of my identity, but on a very important level I am a Jew.” Marton’s father’s family were all killed in Poland, but her mother’s family lived in Jerusalem, so she had the benefit of growing up with grandparents. They were religious, and her grandfather, in particular, was a deep influence on her, teaching her to read by the age of four.

“His core message to me,” says Marton, “was that life is all about how one lives—in contrast to if one lives. And that is the major difference between Jews and Israelis. For Israelis, the question of ‘am I living?’ sanctifies and drives everything—the army, security concerns, etc. For Jews, ‘how am I living?’ is the overriding question, and that means ethics and justice are the most important things; they guide life.”

Marton further says that Judaism stands on two pillars, Torah and Avodah—or, she says, borrowing a phrase from Pirkei Avot<sup>1</sup>, Torah and Flour. “The Torah,” she says, “is thinking. The flour, the bread is doing—and when you are trying to do the right thing, it must be a combination of thought and

action. And it must be critical thinking. For instance, when you hear racist comments on the street, it's not enough to condemn them. You have to listen, think about where they are coming from, and figure out what you can actually do to change them." That was her guiding principle when she founded PHR in February of 1988, two months after the outbreak of the first intifada—critical thinking and action.

"I went to Gaza—you could do that then," she says, "and I saw how bad conditions were. Then it was bad—now it's beyond horrible. The soldiers were breaking the arms and legs of young people, citizens, clubbing them unconscious. And I said, there's no way that my army is going to do this in my name. I am going to fight against this human rights violation."

Initially, the organization focused narrowly on the Palestinians' situation and torture in the occupied Palestinian territories. "These are fundamental opposites," says Marton. "If there are human rights, there can be no torture, and if there is torture, there are no human rights. People would say to us, 'You're doctors, what are you doing here, go focus on medicine.' And I would say back to them, 'Doctors is only half of who we are. We are Physicians for Human Rights, and even though torture is not a virus, not a bacterium, as a doctor I can't tolerate it. Our mission is to fight the evil that people do to other human beings no less than fighting against viruses and microbes.'" Soon, though, "reality quickly entered the room, and we realized it's not just about Palestinians—it's about every sector in Israel." That's how PHR came to work with Bedouin Israelis, with the Jewish poor, and with anybody who has been marginalized, including immigrant workers, people of color, non-citizens, asylum seekers, and prisoners.

The story that Marton most wants to tell—the accomplishment she is most proud of—is this: "Twenty six years ago, when I founded PHR, I was the first person to bring the term 'human rights' into Israeli public discourse and policy-making. Before that, no one talked about it. The term 'civil rights' was there but not 'human rights.' Now, whether or not human rights are protected is another question, but everyone is talking about it, everyone knows what they are."

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<sup>1</sup>Pirkei Avot 3:17—Rabbi Elazar the son of Azariah would say: If there is no Torah, there is no *derech erez*\*; if there is no *derech erez*, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God; if there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. If there is no understanding, there is no knowledge; if there is no knowledge, there is no understanding. If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour.

He would also say: One whose wisdom is greater than his deeds, what is he comparable to? To a tree with many branches and few roots; comes a storm and uproots it, and turns it on its face. As is stated, "He shall be as a lone tree in a wasteland, and shall not see when good comes; he shall dwell parched in the desert, a salt land, uninhabited" (Jeremiah 17:6). But one whose deeds are greater than his wisdom, to what is he compared? To a tree with many roots and few branches, whom all the storms in the world cannot budge from its place. As is stated: "He shall be as a tree planted upon water, who spreads his roots by the river; who fears not when comes heat, whose leaf is ever lush; who worries not in a year of drought, and ceases not to yield fruit" (*ibid.*, v. 8).

\**Derech erez* is literally "the way of the land." In different contexts, it means "common decency," "business dealings," or "physical intimacy."