

Rabbi, Prosecuted by Sharon, Tours U.S.

by M. Woodward

Rabbi Arik Ascherman, currently on trial with co-defendants Ori Omer and Shai Eliezer Tzvi, in Israel, for standing in front of bulldozers about to demolish Palestinian homes in April 2003, recently met with hundreds of friends during a recent multi-city U.S. fundraising tour. Ascherman is the Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR), founded in 1988.

RHR describes itself as “the only organization in Israel today concerned specifically with giving voice to the Jewish tradition of human rights. In a country where Judaism is a powerful force often associated with intolerant and uncompromising beliefs and behaviors, Rabbis for Human Rights teaches a different understanding of the Jewish tradition. Rabbis for Human Rights is also the only Israeli rabbinic organization comprised of Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist rabbis and students.”

Ascherman was introduced to a jam-packed parlor meeting in Philadelphia, Nov. 18, 2004, by Rabbi Brian Walt, Executive Director of RHR-North America. Walt described Ascherman as an “extremely courageous” individual, who, when confronted with an unjust act, “did the only thing he could do—put his body in front of a bulldozer. . . . Our future, is bound up with his acts of courage,” Walt told the gathering, which included more than a dozen rabbis.

Ascherman described the simultaneity of eternity which occurred on the opening date of his trial, Jan. 14, 2004. It was the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, and the *yahrzeit* (death anniversary, according to the Jewish calendar) of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who marched with King, and who taught that “there are few guilty, but all responsible.” This date also concurred with the Torah parsha (or portion), a reading of history’s first conscientious objectors, Egyptian midwives Shiprah and Puah, who defied Pharaoh’s order to murder Hebrew boys at birth, and, “from whom we are nourished.”

“Conscientious objection,” according to Ascherman, “has to be a measure of last resort in order to have our day in court, to prove that the law is illegal and immoral.” A pre-trial motion to have the case against him thrown out, based on the concept of “defense of justice,” was not accepted.

RHR’s activism is not limited to opposition to home demolitions. Among its main foci are education, economic

justice, and the occupation. Related to the latter is the harvesting campaign, and the olive tree campaign, ideas of Rabbis Arthur Waskow and Phyllis Berman, to help Palestinians harvest crops that are difficult to reach because of the wall and check-points. RHR's Human Rights Yeshiva has entered its third year, offering army, and pre-army programs, a Talmudic study of the Israeli Declaration of Independence, hands-on field work, and seminars which bring together Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

Recent statistics report that 25% of Israeli children and youth go to bed hungry at least one night a week. As budget cuts continue to affect the poorest, and weakest, RHR frequently lobbies the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. In May 2005, Jerusalem is to become a pilot city for the "Israeli Wisconsin Plan," a workfare project that cannot succeed in a collapsing economy.

Some Progress

Ascherman noted some optimistic paradigm shifts in his country, specifically pointing out the June 30, 2004, Supreme Court ruling which said that the "separation barrier" is in the wrong place. Leading up to this ruling, police and retired generals had called for alternative routes; Israelis had testified, "we want to be protected, but don't harm our neighbors"; and Israeli and Palestinian youth had been brought together for parlor meetings.

Other improvements, he said, were the increase of the olive harvest campaign from 5-15 people harvesting two or three times a week, to 25 going out every day except the Sabbath (which has increased transportation costs to \$10,000 this year), and harvesting near the Eta Mar settlement being done under the protection of 200 members of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). This is to protect harvesters from stone-throwing and brush-burning settlers, although, he said, it's a "crazy idea that people need protection to get to their own land."

On this occasion, one of Arafat's people was shocked to find himself harvesting Palestinian olives with a rabbi, and being guarded by the IDF. Ascherman responded, "when all is dark, light that first candle."

Ascherman described the events of April 15, involving a demonstration in Bidu, against the wall. He had gone to the aid of a boy being beaten by the IDF, and was choked, head-butted, and handcuffed for his efforts. His subsequent attempt to walk in front of a border police jeep to which 13-year-old Muhammed Badwan had been strapped, as a human shield, were met with derision. Nonetheless, he was able to calm the child, who, when telling this horror story to his family, said, "and then a tall man in a kippah [skull cap] came to my rescue and told me not to be afraid." These events were witnessed and reported by the media.

But, Ascherman is upset by reporters. As he explains in an audio on RHR's website, "[A]s an Israeli, as a Jew, as a rabbi, as a Zionist, I get no great pleasure out of talking with

foreign journalists about the deepest, darkest corners of our Israeli society, the things that someone who lives here and loves this country, would rather pretend don't exist."

New Demolitions

Although home demolitions had been stopped for a while, they have been restarted, and Ascherman was home from his U.S. tour only a couple of days when he sent an urgent e-mail to Rabbi Walt, telling him of two home demolitions of the previous day (leaving 23 people homeless); an expected demolition the next day (which would put another eight people, including an 88-year-old grandmother and a totally disabled child, onto the street); and requesting letters of protest to Israeli officials.

This author sent letters to the Prime Minister, the Interior Minister, and to the Mayor of Jerusalem, asking if destroying peoples' homes is the appropriate way to find a peace partner, quoting the authoritative First Century B.C. Rabbi Hillel ("What is hateful to you, do not do to others"), and citing scripture ("You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike").

It is well known that the legal excuse for destroying Palestinian homes is that the owners have not gotten permits for additions to these houses (such permits are generally denied, without cause), yet the Prime Minister's office sent a two-page, 12-point "official reply, issued by the Israeli Ministry of Justice, regarding demolition of structures used for terrorism."

Mayor Lupolianski sent me a personal response, in which he explained that "the houses that are being demolished, are houses that were illegally built!, " that I should "be aware that the foreign media is known to exaggerate and blow out of proportion anything concerning the State of Israel," and that "the Jerusalem Municipality must take all appropriate actions in order to keep the urban infrastructure under control, and prevent the city of Jerusalem from turning into an urban jungle." His remark that "Arabs that build illegally are treated just like any other criminal in the city—they pay the price for their crimes," immediately provoked the memory of the French policeman who spent his entire life hunting down the pauper who stole a loaf of bread. A follow-up letter to the mayor, requesting a list of Jewish homes that have been demolished for lack of permits, has gone unanswered.

Tikkun Olam

In as literal a translation as can be made from Hebrew, into English, *tikkun olam* means "repair of the world." Rabbi Ascherman gives it a much more sublime sense: "We're put on this Earth for *tikkun olam*, being partners with God in the ongoing process of creation, of making a better world. We have an obligation to be a role model for what Judaism can and ought to be."

Amen.