

Gideon Levy – Speech at the Olof Palme Prize reception ceremony

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So this was hope and now comes the one who always spoils any party. But I think that for the struggle of justice we don't need hope, we need to continue.

I am very excited, moved and thrilled to stand here today, and this prize has more than one meaning for me.

First of all I will not deny getting prizes is always a pleasant experience. In Israel nobody would give me prizes, nobody would come and listen to me and therefore this prize has a few other, special meanings.

First of all, the timing. You are giving me this prize in times in which in Israel more and more anti-democratic forces are gaining power. In times in which they try to silence us one after the other. In times of "mekatism" and first signs of fascism - I never used this word before – in the Israeli society and the Israeli regime. Artists, NGOs are being delegitimized and in this framework, to get this support is something that has a special meaning for me.

And therefore I am so grateful first of all to the Palme family and to the foundation for coming up in this time when our voice is being silenced in Israel to give us this support. But it has some more meanings for me.

First of all to get a prize in the name of Olof Palme – I mean I look at the face of this man whom I remember from my young years. I did some sins in my life and one of them was working with Shimon Peres many years ago - I didn't do many sins but this was one of them - and I remember how Shimon Peres used to criticize Olof Palme. This is a good compliment for Olof Palme.

I remember when in Israel they'd already labelled him an anti-Semitic and an anti-Israeli and even then I knew that's a great man because if he's being attacked in Israel it's a good reason to trust this man and to believe in his way and in a way he was really a pioneer – someone who stood up in front of the camp of the EU of the socialist international saying things that then in the 70s and early 80s were totally unbelievable and totally unaccepted. So to get a prize and to stand in a place where he used to stand for me has a special meaning.

And finally to get a prize in Sweden – maybe the role-model today of a state who follows moral values, who follows international law. Many times I think "how dare you, Israel, how dare you Netanyahu to blame Sweden for immorality to even blame Sweden for anti-Semitism, to blame Sweden Israel has the right to criticize Sweden at all.

And to get a prize from Sweden – and I know you face many problems and it's not an ideal place but still - I wish Israel was Sweden. I wish Israel had a little bit more of the values that Sweden is trying to spread all over the world.

And Sweden - you'd be surprised - is giving me the second prize already in my short or long biography. It is a great prize to get today but the first prize I got ten years ago. It was one of those days in the Gaza strip, one of those very depressing days in the Gaza strip when I went to document some more crimes of the Israeli occupation and I came out through the Ares check point which was then quite a cruel place.

I remember the screams of hundreds of workers who were coming back from Israel back to Gaza, being searched and humiliated going through the regular pass that Palestinians

had to pass because they are Palestinians.

And then came this pretty Swedish girl to me and asked me if I am Gideon Levy and I said yes - and I was in a really bad mood - and she asked if she could do an interview with me and I said yes and I gave her my business card, not really taking it seriously. We've lived together for ten years now.

Catrin Ormestad – a journalist, a novelist. Her book will appear soon, please order a copy. She really stands behind so many articles ideas and the thinking that I am trying to spread, and her parents Susanne and Göran are with me here – they opened Sweden for me, they opened their hearts for me and I am so grateful for this.

I was brought up in Tel Aviv. I was born in Tel Aviv, and I was really what someone could call a good Tel Aviv boy. I was a typical product of the Israeli education system, the Israeli brainwash system. I was deeply convinced that we the Jews are the chosen people and that if we are the chosen people we have the right to do things that no other people have the right to do.

I was totally convinced that after the Holocaust the Jews have the right to do whatever they want as the late unforgettable Golda Meir phrased it once. I was totally convinced that all the Arabs in the world had only one goal and that was to exterminate the Jews and to throw them into the Ocean. I was sure that we are the poor little David and the Arabs are the huge Goliath who wants to kill all of us.

I was sure that you Europeans were all anti-Semites and you never stopped being anti-Semites. I was a typical product of the Israeli public education system and brainwash system.

It was only in the late 80s when I started to travel to the occupied territories, as a journalist. Mitri you told us that you were two months in '67, I was 14. I remember my first tour to the occupied territories as a child. I was part of the national-religious orgy then. I saw all of these holy places that we "liberated", this is what I was told. Bethlehem - we liberated it. Nablus - we liberated it. Hebron - we liberated it.

And I remember something very interesting – I didn't see a single Palestinian there.

I saw just stones and history and promises of God. And no people. And it was only in the late 80s twenty years later when I started to travel to the occupied territories as a journalist that I realised that the biggest drama in Israel after its establishment is taking place in a very dark backyard. Is taking place far off the consciousness of people, even of their knowledge. And it is only half an hour away from our homes.

And it was then in the late 80s that I decided to dedicate my professional career to try to document the occupation for Israeli readership, to try to tell the Israelis the stories they didn't want to know, that they don't know until this very day. And it was only then that I accepted that I am trying to do something that has very, very small chances to succeed. I would try to rehumanize the Palestinians after systematic campaigns to dehumanize them in Israeli public opinion, media and the education system. And ever since then I am doing this quite ungrateful job that is rarely as pleasant at today.

I cannot say that is was a pleasant experience one-and-a-half year ago when I needed a bodyguard and I can't tell you that walking the streets of Tel Aviv today is a pleasant experience. But I am sure that I am doing the right thing.

And here I am today to tell you friends and distinguished guests that we need you. We need each and every one of you.

We need Europe, we need the United States too but that is too far off a dream. We need those who try to reach justice much before peace, peace will be the bonus but first we have to reach justice, some kind of justice, relative justice.

We need you because back home there is very little hope. Israeli public opinion is today by far too brainwashed, life in Israel by far too good and ignorance by far too deep. Why would Israelis care about the occupation? Why would they care about the Palestinians? We have our own good lives, our vacations, our new jeeps. The media is telling us that the Palestinians are all terrorists, and the world is against us so why would we care about the world? To expect change from within the Israeli society today is, I think, quite an exaggerated expectation.

And therefore we need you so much. We need the world to save Israel from its own hands. We need the world to try to reach something very basic - justice. Now I know that many people will tell you that the conflict in the Middle East is a very complex one, that it's not black and white.

Let me tell you here and now, it is black and white. It is not complex. There is an occupier and an occupied. Very clearly so. Black and white. And as long as it remains black and white any man of conscience in the world should identify himself with the just side. With the victim. And who is the real victim?

The Israeli occupation might not be the most brutal one in history, it might not be the longest one in history. But it is the only occupation in history in which the occupier presents himself as the victim. Have you ever heard about an occupation that presents itself not only as a victim, but as the only victim?

Or again as the late Golda Meier phrased it in this unbelievable way: "We will never forgive the Palestinians for forcing us to kill their children." We are the victims.

So in this framework we need the world to take some measures. We need the world to be a wakeup call for many Israelis who are in a coma. We need people like you, states like yours, societies and NGOs to remind the Israelis that the crimes of the occupation have an address, that they are not a force majeure. They have people who are responsible for them and they should be held accountable.

And I can tell you here that each of us, every Israeli carries a responsibility for the occupation. It is not only the settlers, not only the army, not only the secret services - it's all of us. We are all occupiers, we are all settlers, and we are all secret services. Because we let this happen either by being indifferent and silent or by participating in this ongoing crime.

By all means, Israel is not an apartheid state, but the regime in the occupied territories is an apartheid regime. It looks like apartheid, it works like apartheid and it behaves like apartheid. And it is apartheid when two people share one piece of land and one people gain all the rights in the world, and the other people get no rights whatsoever. What else is this but apartheid?

And here I want to pledge you; don't be "balanced". The situation is not balanced. And when the situation is not balanced no one can remain balanced. It is not about balance it is about making a new reality. Creating reality in which some justice can be had, where justice that the Palestinians deserve since so many years will come true.

Don't surrender in front of the manipulation; like labelling you anti-Semites, like claiming that Israel is in an existential danger, like claiming that it is all about security. Have you ever heard someone mention the security of the Palestinian people? Don't they deserve some security? Don't fall into those traps.

We met with Margot Wallström your Foreign Minister today and Lisbet, if I may say so, she may be a successor of Olof Palme. You have got a courageous foreign minister. Back her. She is speaking the truth and she should never apologize for speaking the truth. She talks from the depth of her heart, she is genuine she is sincere. We need voices like hers. We need voices who will challenge not only Israel but also the EU.

We need voices that tell the truth because after 48 years of occupation it is about time for the world to stand up and to say "Enough is enough! It is unacceptable with any kind of apartheid regime in the twenty first century."

Yes there was a Holocaust. Yes we have feelings of guilt. Yes we carry the responsibility for our grandparents but exactly because of those responsibilities, exactly because of these guilt feelings, justified or not, we call for justice in the Middle East.

Let me dedicate my last sentence to someone I guess none of you have ever heard of and it would have been so much better if you never would. I want to dedicate my last sentence to Ruqayya Abu Eid.

Ruqayya Abu Eid was a 13 year old girl living in a tent in Anatta next to Jerusalem. Last Saturday just 6 days ago she woke up early in the morning and at 8 o'clock - maybe after a fight with her sister maybe not, we don't know - she took a knife and went to the settlement which is one and a half kilometres away from her tent.

She was a girl who had nothing in her life. She did not even go to school after four grades. She was in charge milking the sheep. Her father told me she was very good at milking her sheep, but she did not have much prospects for the future, and her present was not very good either. She took a knife and went to the checkpoint next to her home. She just starts to run with a knife and she knew that after she started doing this there is only one possibility - that she will be executed. And this is what happened; two Israeli armed private security guards shot her dead like they have done almost every day in the recent two months claiming that they were in life danger.

The Israeli media she was defined as a terrorist of 13. People who have children of 13, people who know how children of 13 look like, people who know how girls of 13 look like, people who know how teenagers behave from time to time without any doubt wrote that she was a terrorist of 13. And that the security guards had to shoot her dead. Not catch her, not to stop her, not use tear gas. Not even shoot at her legs, just shoot her dead like they have done in so many cases in the recent 2-3 months.

I think today about Ruqayya. I will continue to write stories like hers even if no Israeli wants to hear about Ruqayya. Even if all Israelis will be deeply convinced that Ruqayya was a terrorist who deserved death, I will continue. Thank you so much.