

Human Rights Watch

Beverly Hilton Hotel, November 17, 2009

Below is one of the many invocations that Rabbi Beerman offered (along with George Regas) at the annual dinner of Human Rights Watch, an organization on whose board he sat and for which he served as a kind of rabbi-in-residence. In this set of remarks from 2009, Beerman identifies a persistent danger that he often mentioned in his speeches: silence in the face of injustice. As a foil to his point, he summoned forth the words of Rabbi Leo Baeck, the great German-Jewish leader after whom Beerman's congregation was named, who once remarked that "a spirit is characterized (by what) it beholds in silence." Not content with this sensibility, Beerman referred to two contemporary events about which one could not remain silent: the ongoing US military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel's rocket attacks on and invasion of the Gaza Strip in late 2008/early 2009. In both instances, Beerman believed that the loss of civilian life did not—and never could—justify military action. Consequently, vocal opposition, not silence, was called for. In the case of Israel's Gaza conflict, he was well aware that his willingness to be critical would generate anger from some in the Jewish community, including from members of his own liberal congregation.

If I were to fashion an appropriate epigraph or motto for this evening in which we celebrate the work of Human Rights Watch, and the extraordinary valor of Elena Milashina and Daniel Bekele, I could think of nothing more appropriate than the words of Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leading rabbi of Germany when Hitler came to power, a concentration camp survivor: "A spirit," Baeck wrote, "is characterized not only by what it does, but no less by what it permits, what it forgives, what it beholds in silence."

Permits, forgives, beholds in silence.

What do we behold in silence? One must be very careful with one's silences, for silences rise to heaven as well.

In being here tonight we express our appreciation for those who have had the courage to refuse to be silent wherever human rights are trampled upon; and, to the great discomfort of some, have refused to be silent about certain sensitive, controversial issues, like the behavior of the military forces of our own country; or, although it consists of a small proportion of the focus of our work, about what really happened last January to the people of southern Israel and Gaza, and the manner in which the men, women, and children were killed there.

In Israel, there was a great poet, Daliah Ravikovich, who died just a few years ago, considered to be the outstanding woman poet of the Hebrew language. One of her best known poems is entitled "Hovering at a Low Altitude." In this poem, there is a female narrator who presents herself in a very satirical way as witness to the rape and murder of an Arab shepherd child. The narrator watches from the safe distance of a low altitude and does nothing. As she watches she says, "I'm not here." She sees the little girl, yet she says over and over, "I'm not here." The image of hovering in this poem (the Hebrew word is *rechifa*) contains a double meaning, connecting the language of army bulletins—"Low flying helicopters in hovering formations over the Gaza strip"—with Tel Aviv slang, where *l'rachef* means "to be cool, by staying detached from the political situation." The image of low altitude hovering over an atrocity is an emblem of the situation of the ordinary citizen knowing, but choosing not to see certain terrible acts being perpetrated. It is primarily a parable of the moral untenability of detached observation.

What is it we choose to affirm in being here tonight? Not for us detached observation. Not for us to behold in silence. No. We *are* here. And wherever Human Rights Watch is, a voice goes forth to cry out, "We are here!"

COMMENTARY BY JANE OLSON

We began a tradition at Human Rights Watch (HRW) galas in Los Angeles during the early 1990s of having Rabbi Leonard Beerman and Dr. George Regas open dinner programs with invocations that included a blessing in Hebrew, in the Jewish tradition, and in English, in the Christian tradition, a tradition not followed in New York or other city HRW dinners. The two set a solemn and loving tone for the evening, and our guests expressed gratitude.

The invocation became an eagerly anticipated opening, and after a few years we asked Rabbi Beerman to present a more substantive message that acknowledged both the historic roots and contemporary nature of human rights abuse.

Leonard's messages were deep, literary, and poetic. A thousand noisy and hungry attendees would become absolutely still, riveted on Leonard's words. Every year I received many requests for copies of his text.

A memorable invocation delivered by Rabbi Beerman on November 17, 2009, demonstrated his own courageous stance against human rights abuse. He used the occasion to focus on recent violence in Israel, expressing his disappointment in military forces, whose recent retaliation in Gaza killed many innocent men, women, and children.

Leonard challenged actions of his beloved Israel, standing up to many conservative Jews who rejected and condemned any criticism as anti-Semitic. By so doing, he defended the research and reporting on Israel by Human Rights Watch, which held Israel to universal standards of civilian protection and rule of law, with no exceptionalism.

Leonard also challenged us all as individuals, using a poem entitled “Hovering at a Low Altitude.” The narrator, witness to horrendous abuse of a child, stood silently by as a “detached observer.”

An ordinary citizen, Leonard said, by choosing not to see certain terrible acts being perpetrated, but to behold in silence, violates basic moral standards of humanity.

“Not for us, detached observation,” he declared. “We are here!”

We could always count on Rabbi Leonard Beerman to *be here*, as our moral compass and North Star. Even in his passing, his inspirational and passionate words and his uncommonly brave and moral life continue to guide all who are fortunate enough to hold his memory dear.