

Dear Prime Minister Sharon,

We Rabbis, leaders of our communities, long-time Zionists and supporters of Israel, are writing to express our concern and our support for our colleague, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, who is on trial in Jerusalem for trying to prevent the demolition of two Palestinian homes.

We have two concerns. Our first concern is for our colleague who has devoted his life to Israel and to the Zionist vision of building and sustaining a Jewish State that exemplifies the values of compassion and justice.

Rabbi Ascherman has dedicated his career to protecting the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians and his Zionist and Jewish commitments inspire thousands of Jews in Israel and abroad. Rabbi Ascherman and his two co-defendants welcome the opportunity to stand trial in order to prove in a court of law that the policy of home demolitions is illegal and immoral. However, we fear that the decision to prosecute him is an attempt to silence his voice.

For us and for many Jews in our communities, the work of Rabbis for Human Rights represents the Jewish moral conscience. We express our love and commitment for Israel by supporting that work.
To silence it is to push us away from the Israel we love.

Our second concern is about the home demolition policy itself. The homes that were demolished were not demolished for any security reason. None of the people in these homes engaged in violence or harboring terrorists. They were demolished because of a violation of zoning regulations in a context where it is almost impossible for Palestinian families in those parts of the West Bank under Israeli civilian control or in Jerusalem to legally obtain building permits. B'tslem, the Israeli human rights organization, reports that since 1987, literally thousands of homes have been built for Jews in these same areas, many receiving permits retroactively. Since 1987, 2,500 Palestinian houses on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem have been demolished for administrative reasons leaving more than 16,000 Palestinians homeless.

Home demolitions constitute an especially disturbing human rights issue. A sense of home is an essential part of our humanity; homelessness has always been considered a human tragedy. Jews, because of our own history, are especially conscious of the issue of home, and Zionism can be said to be the movement to find a home for a people so often deprived of our homes.

The destruction of a home can only be experienced as a violation by its inhabitants. Something fundamental to one's identity has been removed. To be deprived of one's

home is to be naked in the world. More, it can mean that one is unable to locate oneself in the world, to feel that one has a place. Without a home, wherever one walks in the world, a sense of tragedy and pain, of emptiness and shame accompanies you.

Any society must proceed with absolute caution before it destroys a home. That is a basic claim of justice. It is why RHR has been so involved with issues of home demolition since 1997. It is why Rabbi Ascherman stood with the Maswadeh family in Beit Hanina when the bulldozers came, leaving Sufian and Sana Maswadeh, their children, Mr. Maswadeh's sick mother, as well as his brother's entire family homeless, within a matter of minutes. It is why he stood with the family of Ahmed Mousa Dari in Issawiya, when the bulldozers came to demolish their home. It is why he is now standing trial.



The Maswadeh family at the site of their destroyed home with Rabbi Ascherman (Reform), RHR Chair Rabbi Tzvi Weinberg (Conservative), Rabbi Isaac Newman (Orthodox), and Rabbi Yehiel Greniman (Conservative).

"It has been told to you, o human, what is good, what the Lord requires of you: only to perform justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

The home demolition policy contradicts the kind of Israel envisioned by the founders of a Jewish state, one that celebrates the prophetic voice which has animated our people for centuries, and which has given such vitality to the Zionist movement.

This vision is articulated in the Declaration of Independence when it describes the state as one that "will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel." In the spirit of this vision, Israel must protect minority rights, and cherish and listen to its critics, to those who stand with the poor and powerless.

We urge the government to exercise wisdom in this matter: to rescind its policy of home demolitions and exonerate Rabbi Ascherman and others who have protested this unjust policy. We believe that the word of the prophets still speaks to us: ultimately, Zion will only be redeemed through justice and those who return to her through acts of righteousness (*Isaiah 1:27*).

Respectfully,
Rabbi for Human Rights North America

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- I want to amplify the rabbinic voice for human rights in Israel and spread the message of this letter. Enclosed is my contribution of: \$5000 \$1000 \$720 \$360 \$180 Other _____
Donors of \$180 or more will receive a copy of our video Voices of Rabbis for Human Rights.
- Please add my name to the list of supporters of the Rabbis' Letter to Prime Minister Sharon.
- I would like to bring a speaker from Rabbis for Human Rights to my community.
- I would like to make an additional contribution of \$_____ to an emergency humanitarian and legal aid fund to fight the policy of home demolition and to aid Palestinian families affected by it.

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Please send your tax-deductible donation to Rabbis for Human Rights North America P.O. Box 1539 West Tisbury, MA 02575
You may also make a donation online by visiting our website: www.rhr-na.org

Founded in 1988, Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) is the only Israeli rabbinic organization composed of more than 100 Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal rabbis and rabbinical students, including rabbis in national leadership positions, prominent educators, and spiritual leaders of congregations. RHR is the sole Israeli organization whose purpose is to give voice to the Jewish religious traditions of human rights and to strive for justice as reflected in sacred texts and Israel's Declaration of Independence.

RHR's current efforts are focused on:

- Social and Economic Justice:** As Israel's social gap increases, RHR champions the rights of the poorest and weakest Israelis by advocacy, education and humanitarian assistance.
- Palestinian Human Rights:** RHR, while affirming Israel's right and obligation to protect its citizens, seeks to prevent the violation of Palestinian rights by preventing home demolitions, protecting olive groves and harvesters, and assisting the lahlan Bedouin and the "cave dwellers" of the South Hebron hills.
- Education:** RHR educates teachers and students in the Israeli school system, is creating a Talmud-like commentary on Israel's Declaration of Independence, and is running a Human Rights Yeshiva for Israeli college students.

RHR was honored with the *Speaker of the Knesset's Award for the Quality of Life* in recognition of its contribution to Israeli society and has been endorsed by the North American rabbinic associations of the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements.