

Laudatio of Dr. Haim Weiss

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(The spoken word applies)

I wish to thank the organizers of the TO DO! Contest for Socially Responsible Tourism for inviting me to speak in this ceremony. I wish also to congratulate the award winning groups, Caminos de Altamira from Argentina and Alternative Tourism Group from Palestine for winning the prize as well as for their hard and impressive work.

Reading the rich material on both organizations underscores the importance of the personal, direct encounter as an affective means for dealing with major economical and political crises. In the Palestinian group as in the Argentinean one we can find a similar method of operation: depending on local forces and abilities in order to create personal and direct tourism which allows the tourist to see and understand the local way of life with no need for governmental mediation. This way of tourism allows the visitor to see and feel the real life of the area; to learn about their folklore and daily life and to develop a better understanding of the political, social and economical problems and challenges they are facing.

The Argentinean initiative is a result of the major economical crises of the year 2000. The founders of this project responded to the challenge and took social responsibility. By using a local radio broadcast they managed to assemble a small group of local farmers and together they created a tourist plan based on the unique abilities and sources of the group members such as pottery, local cooking, traditional music and of course wine making.

As we all know the Palestinian society is in the midst of grave and hard economical and political crises. The Alternative Tourism Group has managed to create hope and opportunity to maintain tourism in this area. By depending on local forces and abilities they gave tourists the option to meet the real Palestinians, not those you see on television standing in Israeli check points or as suicide bombers but as persons, real people with real problems and joys, people with husbands, wives and children. The personal contact saves the need for a scholarly discussion on the situation of the Palestinians – it is simple there. When you personally cross an Israeli check point you don't have to talk about it – you just feel it, with all its complexity. In addition to that the fact that the tourists stay in local houses on B&B bases is a major economical contribution which bypasses the Israeli and Palestinian tourist mechanism and gives the money directly to the people who really need it.

In addition to the high appreciation for both organizations which work under very hard circumstances in order to create different tourism which promote multi-cultural dialogue, I am happy to be here today because Mr. Rami Kassis and I are actually

neighbors. I live in a small place – Tzur Haddassa, 10 minutes drive from Mr. Kassis office and despite the short geographical distance it seems that we need this ceremony in Berlin to meet each other. Even though we are neighbors it is almost impossible for us to meet each other in our homes. The separation wall and the road blocks, both a miserable result of the occupation, war and distrust between our peoples, prevent us from our basic right to have peaceful and normal relationship with each other.

I was asked by the organizers of the TO DO! contest to speak in this ceremony since I am a member of an Israeli-Palestinian group – "Combatants for Peace". Our main goal is to create open and free dialogue between ex-soldiers from both sides. We came to the understanding that ignorance and prejudices are the biggest problem in our area. Many people in both sides are deeply convinced that there is no partner for peace on the other side and therefore the only way to make the other side move is by using force. We may be naïve but we are positive that most people in both sides wish for peace. Therefore each one of us made a personal decision to completely quit the use of guns, tanks and stones and start talking.

The meetings between us and the Palestinians were not easy at first. We were used to fighting but not to talking. The Palestinians we, Israelis, were the soldiers that came to their houses in the middle of the night, and we, the Israelis remembered that some of the people on the Palestinian side drove cars with bombs to our cities and stabbed soldiers as well as civilians. We have built the trust between us by not hiding the truth. One after the other we stood up and told our stories. We described battles, fights, road blocks and a lot of fears and regrets. We have discovered the power of dialogue as a mean for replacing the national hatred with personal friendship.

I wish to end my short speech with an old story from the Jewish Talmud. In the dark days before the destruction of the second Temple when the Romans closed the city of Jerusalem from the out side and Jewish extremists destroyed the city from with in, one of Jewish leaders, Rabbi Yohanan decided to go out of city walls and meet the Roman commander, Vespasian. Rabbi Yohanan had a dialogue with him, not an easy or simple one, but a dialogue on the future of the Jewish community after the destruction. The end of this dialogue was that the Roman commander promised the existence and continuity of Jewish leadership and by that, as most historians of that period agree, Rabbi Yohanan saved the Jewish community from total destruction. The fact that one leader did not surrender to the violence around him and insisted on the option of dialogue as the best and most affective mean for dealing with conflict is very impressive. I wish that our leaders will have the same courage and vision as Rabbi Yohanan had so they can look beyond the violence and offer their people the comforting option of dialogue.

I thank you all for your attention and I wish to congratulate again the two winning groups for their efforts to bring people together – we all know that this is not an easy job – thank you.