

# ▶ INTERVIEW

by SARA LEHMANN

## THE SENTINEL AT THE U.N.

An interview with UN Watch's **HILLEL NEUER**

**Hillel Neuer** has been championing human rights in the lion's den for over a decade. As **executive director** of UN Watch, the Geneva-based NGO (non-governmental organization) that monitors U.N. activities, Neuer fights tirelessly and fearlessly **against discrimination** and injustice at the U.N., specifically when aimed at the lone Jewish state.

Awarded by McGill University with an **honorary doctorate** in 2018 for being “a voice for those without a voice,” Neuer's work as an advocate for human rights has earned him universal accolades. According to the *Journal de Montreal*, Neuer **“makes the U.N. tremble.”** And the *Tribune de Genève* wrote that Neuer is “feared and dreaded” by despots at the U.N.



**D**ictatorships around the globe have reason to fear Neuer, whose arguments to advance human rights have generated heated response and have become flashpoints for debate. In 2007, Neuer's rebuke of the Human Rights Council was "a diplomatic moment to remember," and 10 years later, his speech, "Where Are Your Jews?" has been translated into multiple languages and viewed millions of times across social media.

A native of Montreal, Neuer is a lawyer who represented victims of discrimination and worked on human rights constitutional-related cases. He has a BA in Political Science from Concordia University, a BCL and LLB from McGill University Faculty of Law, and a LLM in comparative constitutional law from Hebrew University. Neuer worked in the area of public policy and international relations, including at Jerusalem's Shalem Center. He clerked at the Supreme Court of Israel and authored articles on law, politics, and international relations.

*Hamodia* spoke with Neuer about his fight for justice and his specific efforts to achieve equality for Israel and for Jews in one of the world's most hostile environments.

**Please describe the history and mission of UN Watch and how it operates to achieve its goals.**

The founder of UN Watch was a great American named Morris Abram, who passed away in 2000. He was a civil rights leader and a friend and colleague of Martin Luther King, back in the early 1950s. He was also a Jewish leader, the head of the AJC and the Soviet Jewry movement. Eventually, Abram was made ambassador at the U.N. headquarters in Geneva, where



the Human Rights Commission is based. He saw terrible things happening there against human rights, morality, international law, Israel and Jews.

When Abram retired in 1993, he decided to stay in Geneva and create for the very first time an independent body to monitor the U.N. and hold it accountable to its own U.N. charter principles. Not against the U.N., but seeing that the U.N. lives up to its own principles, both on issues of concern to the Jewish community, anti-Semitism, equal treatment for Israel, as well as universal issues and international human rights.

**As a human rights activist, do you find yourself primarily defending Israel, or do your commitments extend to other countries?**

I typically will act on behalf of dozens of different causes, way beyond the cause of equal treatment for Israel. We reach out vigorously for human rights in Venezuela, Iran, Zimbabwe, Russia, and China. We are one of the leading groups at the U.N. bringing dissidents and victims to speak and testify at the U.N. We are very active on human rights issues and fighting dictatorships that don't have any insti-



Hillel C. Neuer, executive director of United Nations Watch, testifying before the 40th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, March 18.



At the Geneva Summit, 2017.

tutions of democracy or accountability. That's where we focus — our role is to give a voice and a platform to human rights champions.

**You recently made headlines as one of the NGOs whose work led to a review of the PA by the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which resulted in confronting anti-Semitism in the PA. In what way did UN Watch contribute to this first-ever critique, and what's the next step in this process?**

It's interesting to understand what happened here. About five years ago, the PA began to try to join various international bodies. Once they got recognized as the "State of Palestine" by the U.N. around six to seven years ago, they tried to use that to boost

their international status, as well as to pursue Israel in all kinds of international litigation — to join bodies as a means to go after Israel, to sue Israel in international tribunals, etc. But they didn't sufficiently realize that by joining various bodies, they themselves would have to be examined.

For the first time last month, they were examined by the U.N. Committee against Racial Discrimination. It took place in Geneva, across the street from our office. We went there and submitted a major legal brief, 32 pages, documenting and giving many examples of how the PA violates this convention, how they routinely and systematically discriminate against Jews — in their lies, their practices, their policies, their incitement in the media, public officials, imams, TV, you name it. And we documented all of it, including pictures of anti-Semitic caricatures in their schoolbooks.

Then we went on the U.N. website to see the other reports from Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, and all the Palestinian NGOs. And guess what? There were none, other than two groups, including NGO Monitor. There are dozens and dozens of pro-Palestinian NGOs, funded by the EU, that are always at the U.N. whenever Israel is examined, which hap-



Saudi dissident Ali Al-Ahmed and Hillel Neuer.

pens every regular session. At the last minute, only one NGO showed its face, after I tweeted that they are effectively boycotting a session on the Palestinians. We were the ones who ended up briefing the experts. A number of them accepted our material, asked questions, and the Palestinians freaked out. They couldn't deal with being examined instead of Israel. And they tried to cast aspersions against us.

**Do you think you can build upon this, and is the U.N. open to hearing more of the same?**

This is a small note of optimism in the otherwise extremely anti-Israel bigotry and prejudice that is pervasive at the U.N. Some are willing to acknowledge the truth. The committee issued its own verdict in this case and found reason to be concerned with anti-Semitism among public statements and in schoolbooks, and hate speech against Israelis. And they called upon Palestinians to stop it.

This is now in a U.N. document, and it's a marker by which they can be held to account. It gives advocates who are fighting against anti-Semitism an important tool. The next time the issue is raised, we can say that the committee expressed concerns about anti-Semitism in the PA and the Palestinians were called upon to stop it. Have they lived up to it? I'll hold them to account when I speak at the Human Rights Council.

**The U.N. Human Rights Council's elected members include an absurd collection of rogue states of human rights abusers, such as Russia, Cuba, China, Qatar and Venezuela. With more than half of the Council's resolutions being against Israel, the only true democracy in the Middle East, do you predict this farcical trend to continue?**

Each country has its own dynamic. Some countries improve and some get worse. The government in Brazil is



Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza and Hillel Neuer at the Tenth Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, February 20, 2018.

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United Nations European Headquarters, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.

now beginning to change its vote, which is excellent. The U.K. changed a number of its votes at the Human Rights Council to support rather than condemn Israel. That was important. But you can have the opposite: You can have countries like Canada and Australia, who had more supportive governments that are sometimes replaced by less-supportive governments. Trudeau generally supports Israel, but on a few new resolutions he tends to abstain. So it's hard to see a trend.

My experience in the past several decades is that hostility to Israel has been relatively consistent, even as some governments change. But it's our responsibility to keep pushing, to keep making the case. You never know if Israel gets stronger and has more resources — politically, economically, militarily, with cybersecurity, technological power. It may slowly begin to compete with the oil weapon that the Arabs use so effectively.

There are many factors that go into the U.N. bias against Israel. There are 56 Islamic states, and there's only one Jewish state. There's vote-trading, fear of terrorism, attitudes toward the Jewish state wherein Israel is treated as the Jew among the nations. There are factors that won't go away. But the U.N. remains a very important international

fort that is regarded as credible around the world, so it's our job to stay there and make the case.

**Aside from fluctuations under the Obama administration, the United States has long been a champion of Israel at the U.N. The Trump administration, especially under Ambassador Nikki Haley, defended Israel not only in tenor but in fact, including cutting off funds from UNWRA and leaving UNESCO over anti-Israel bias. Has America's fierce protection of Israel changed the dynamics among Europeans and other U.N. countries?**

No. I don't think any of the Europeans are terribly impressed with Trump or the decisions that he makes. So we haven't seen any influence on other countries. Nikki Haley is an extraordinary communicator and a great defender of Israel and of the founding principles of the U.N. and human rights. And she certainly was able to put pressure on the U.N. But the European problematic positions against Israel remain and will probably continue.

What about Iran? Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's repeated appeals to the world community at the U.N. to confront Iran have been met with resistance, especially now by France's Pres-

Hillel Neuer at United Nations European Headquarters, Palais des Nations, Geneva.



ident Macron. His disclosure of what he called an “atomic warehouse” in Iran’s capital has been vindicated by Iran’s refusal to cooperate with a U.N. investigation in Tehran by the IAEA. What more can Israel do?

There are many levels of activity happening, including, obviously, military. There’s a small-scale conflict going on, which used to be more concealed in the past. Things have gotten much more open now, given Israel’s acknowledgment of attacks against Iranian military activity in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Things are heating up. At the U.N. it remains to be seen. The EU holds the cards here. Obviously Trump and the EU will determine how the international community responds. France is trying to bring Iran back into the deal, and it remains to be seen how Trump approaches it.

**In addition to the threat from Iran, Israel faces legal warfare by Arab states and the international community, chiefly through BDS. How is this battle being waged at the U.N.?**

The U.N. is “ground zero” for lawfare and BDS, using the language and ideas of international law to erode Israel’s ability to defend itself from terrorism and other attacks. The U.N. is also ground zero for delegitimization of Israel and the Jewish people, because U.N. decisions are translated into every language around the world and regarded as credible, authoritative, and a statement of international opinion of international law.

The Human Rights Council is now busy threatening to publish a blacklist of anyone who does business in the ter-

ritories over the Green Line. This is a form of BDS, and we are fighting against it. We’ve submitted different legal documents making the case why this blacklist is entirely inconsistent with any practice of the U.N. to date. The U.N. has no mandate to interfere

with legitimate economic relations. There is no source of international law that prohibits any company from doing business in the Old City of Jerusalem or anywhere else over the Green Line. For the U.N. to suggest the opposite is entirely ridiculous.

Moreover, the publication of this blacklist would certainly do nothing to bring sides together; it would only increase polarization. So we have encouraged the U.N. to back away from this political decision enacted by the dictator-dominated Human Rights Council. It is sadly supported by radical groups such as Human Rights Watch, which is a viciously anti-Israel group.

**Because of such policies, many Americans resent their outsized financial support of the U.N. budget. Trump has said that the U.N. needs to make sure that “no**

**member state shoulders a disproportionate share of the burden.” How can Americans demand more accountability for their taxpayer dollars?**

I think Congress is a good place. U.S. Congress has to approve these authorizations and I think Congress should bring in U.N. officials and hold their feet to the fire. It’s been done in the past; Ambassador Nikki Haley was clear about how America might vote with its pocketbook. You

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want to keep that scrutiny both by the administration and Congress together. It doesn't work all the time, and you can't overuse the weapon, but it can achieve certain results.

**The U.N. General Assembly will convene soon. What do you think we can expect from the upcoming gathering?**

We can expect the sort of thing where dictators will attack the U.S. Trump is the wild card and we'll be looking to see what he says about Iran. People will also be looking to what Netanyahu might say. Otherwise, I don't predict anything notable coming out of it.

**As an advocate for Israel and for the truth in a hostile environment, do you ever get discouraged or feel like you're fighting an uphill battle?**

It's always an uphill battle. In terms of getting discouraged — yes. There are moments when we're sitting in an emergency session called to condemn Israel, which is defending itself against terrorism, and you hear not only the worst dictatorships pronouncing themselves on human rights but also European democracies and the whole world ganging up on the Jewish state for reasons with no logical basis to them. It's also discouraging to see dictators abusing human rights and seeing the worst abusers elected to high positions.

Jewish tradition says that we go through life with two pieces of paper in one pocket — one that says you came from dust and you go back to dust and the other that says the world was created for you. There are moments when we think we are dust and then there are moments which we just had, when we showed up and made the case about Palestinian anti-Semitism and it made itself into the U.N. questions and final report. And the headline went around the world.

There was a moment when we revealed that the U.N. Women's Rights Commission elected Saudi Arabia in a secret ballot, with scandalous support from democracies like Belgium, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. There were moments when, because of UN Watch, the German Bundesstadt began to ask why Germany is voting the wrong way on Israel, when Dutch MPs bring up our questions, when the House of Lords raises our issues and challenges the government, and when the U.K. changes its vote. There are many examples where, piece by piece, we feel that our work has a certain resonance and the truth is getting out. We get thousands of messages from supporters around the world. All of this is extremely encouraging and gives us the strength and wind in our sails to keep fighting. ■

We all remember the horrific bus accident that took place in Eretz Yisroel the week of Parshas Tetzaveh 5776.

A 402 bus on the way from Yerushalayim to Bnei Brak crashed into a truck stopped on the side of the road, killing 6 people seated on the right side of the bus and injuring many others.

At that time, a bochur from Bnei Brak was in middle of a shidduch with a girl from a broken family in Yerushalayim. As the shidduch progressed and an engagement seemed to be approaching, a member of the girl's family contacted the bochur to make sure he was aware that the girl owned a smartphone, contrary to the bidding of the gedolim.

That day, when they met, he brought up this

matter in the discussion.

After just a few minutes, he lowered his eyes and ashamedly admitted that he, too, had a smartphone. She was shocked to hear this, and said, "I have a hard situation and I'm not living with my family. so at least I have a strong reason that I feel I need a smartphone, but what's your excuse?" In short,

they both decided, then and there, to get rid of their smartphones. As they smashed the glass of the screens, they truly felt the joy of a mazel tov.

On the way back to Bnei Brak later that day, the bochur got onto the 402 bus and settled in his seat on the right side of the bus. After just a minute, he suddenly, inexplicably felt an urge to get up and move over to the left side of bus.

And when 3 crashed shortly thereafter, he emerged miraculously unscathed.

(As told by R' Yisroel Brog)

they truly felt the joy of a mazel tov.

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