

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE FOR PEACE AWARD CEREMONY: OPENING REMARKS

Jack Himmelstein

Thank you, Lela. Thank you, Dean Rudenstine. Thank you, Robyn Weinstein and Ben Thompson. I am most pleased to be part of this gathering to honor Amira Dotan and her dedication to peace. I felt when I met her—and the feeling has only deepened since—that in her honesty, integrity, and caring, Amira embodies a true embracing of the best in human spirit.

I first met Amira, and her friend and colleague, Hanna Kotzer Sapir, when they came to a mediation course we gave in New York in 1997. They then invited me to teach in Israel. We were teacher and student for maybe a day, and then quickly we were friends and have been friends since. Amira really didn't need to learn mediation; she learned some vocabulary. All her life, she had been pursuing ways to deal constructively and caringly with conflict.

Soon after she went back to Israel from the mediation course—this is one of the stories about Amira that I love the most—she asked for a meeting with the former Chief Rabbi to talk about mediation. When they met, she attempted to describe mediation and its importance. And as Rabbis often do, the Rabbi, in Talmudic fashion, responded with a question: “Amira, let me ask you: what did Cain say to Abel and Abel say to Cain before Cain slew Abel?” She hesitated, and he persisted: “I’m asking you a question. The Bible is very clear as to who begat whom, who said what to whom, it’s all very clear.” She was getting a little nervous by this point. The Rabbi continued, “I repeat the question: What did Cain say to Abel and Abel say to Cain before Cain slew Abel?” Amira finally responded, “Rabbi, I’m afraid that I do not remember what was said.” “That’s exactly right,” the Rabbi retorted, “nothing was said! So, I think you’re on to something!” The Cain and Abel saga was the first recorded human conflict in the long arc of conflict that continues to this day. And, Amira *is* on to something.

She was born just nine months before the State of Israel was born, and her life has paralleled the development of Israel and embraces the challenge of building that state she loves so deeply. Amira and her family have their own history in that land—she’s the seventh generation, her children the eighth, and their children

are the ninth generation. It is, of course, a land with a long history of conflict, and Amira brings a deep and abiding commitment to finding a way to work in and through conflict together. And she does so with humility and an amazing capacity to understand, accept, and embrace the human condition with all the difficulties and challenges that bring us to where we are today in so many parts of the world. And she does so with an abiding commitment to finding a way through conflict that honors the dignity of the human spirit.

Amira is the first woman in Israel to attain the rank of Brigadier General in the Israeli Defense Forces (“IDF”), where she actively served from 1965–1988. She succeeded not only in that personal achievement for herself, but also in securing respect and equality for women throughout the IDF. After leaving active duty, Amira founded the Middle East Career Women’s Forum in order to build a strong network of professional women throughout the Middle East and has remained very close to them in spite of all the difficulties in that region. She later became Vice President of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

She has worked extensively with the Bedouin population within Israel, particularly with women in the Bedouin communities, in ways designed to give them cultural legitimacy. These have included supporting them in starting their first agricultural cooperative; persuading banks to open branches in largely Bedouin communities; and increasing visibility of social security in Bedouin communities, including the appointment of Bedouin social security representatives.

After studying mediation with us in New York, she took what she really already knew, and now had words and concepts for, and put them together in her own way and started to work with mediation. Together with Hanna, they started the Gishur Neve Tzedek Mediation Center in 1998. I could talk at length about Hanna, who was the first Brigadier General of the Israeli police force, but that’s for another time. When Amira and Hanna met, they became instant friends and colleagues. They travel together, they work together, and most of all, they laugh a lot together; and I am privileged to be a part of the laughter when I have the opportunity to be around them.

The Center provides mediation services and training in Israel and has also been a force to broaden knowledge about mediation to the general population. As part of the Center’s work, Amira and Hanna also teach mediation in two academic colleges, Netanya Academic College and The Academic College of Management.

Amira works in many ways to try to focus on not just the *what* of conflict but also on the *how* of the conflict—how conflict is talked about and dealt with. When she was on the Knesset until recently, she would report to me that she would talk to others there about their conflicts in the Knesset, and she would say, “Let’s not just talk about the substance of the conflict, but *how* we are interacting about a conflict.” She said that over the three years of her service there that some of the people started to understand the beauty and the challenge of the *how* and were astonished to see the difference it carried.

As a Member of the Knesset from 2006–2009, she continued on the path of dedicating her career to public service of Israel and working towards peace. She has argued for the full implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 to increase women’s involvement in peacekeeping and conflict resolution at all levels, to incorporate gender perspectives in peace agreements, to address the impact of conflict on women, and protect against and prosecute sexual exploitation. Within the Knesset, she also initiated the passage of a law which requires that any new proposed legislation be reviewed for its potential impact on women.

She represented the Knesset in the European Parliament and in the NATO group of parliamentarians, and has participated in a number of second-track dialogues on the peace process in the Middle-East. Most recently, before leaving the Knesset, she initiated and guided the process that led to the recent enactment of legislation providing for a new broad-based Israeli National Security Council to advise the Prime Minister of Israel on matters of national security and foreign affairs.

Amira also currently heads the Israeli Academic Research Institute of Conflict Resolution and Mediation of the Academic College of Management. As part of that Institute, she recently started a new initiative, *Deepening the Dialogue*, which brings prominent Middle Eastern figures from outside the political establishment (Israelis, Palestinians, and others) together with experts on dispute resolution, to inquire into fundamental aspects of living with and moving together through the conflict in the Middle East. The focus of that inquiry includes: *who* should engage in dialogue?; *how* can we talk together?; and *how* understandings that grow out of these inquiries can be disseminated to the broader public throughout the region in ways that might make for a meaningful and larger dialogue between these peoples?

Amira has dedicated her career to public service. She always seeks with great care to find ways to work with the challenges within the Israeli society and beyond. In all of her endeavors, she advocates for a deepening of understanding, consensus building, and bridging divides through dialogue for which she is honored this evening—an honor which she richly deserves. I salute you and thank you, Amira, for all that you do; I thank Cardozo, and all here tonight, who made this award possible, for recognizing Amira's contribution toward peace and understanding.

Amira Dotan is thankfully one of many dedicated individuals in Israel, the broader Middle East, and other war-torn regions, who consistently strive to bring people together using groundbreaking conflict resolution strategies and their own initiatives and innovative visions. This award, which she so richly deserves, also honors them.

Thank you.