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Perach - Involving Students in the Community

Keynote Address

by

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Israel

Modern Worldwide Problems

Modern life brought with it new and almost unheard of problems not so many years ago: Juvenile delinquency, one-parent families, drugs, school violence, street children.

Today we are dealing with what is probably one of the most serious problems of our times -- the future of our youth. It seems that on one hand we are entering an era with fewer wars and conflicts (even the 100 year-old one in the Middle East is almost behind us), and the world at large is wealthier and more prosperous than ever before. Even Australian troops, who in the past were sent abroad to combat and war, are being sent on peace-keeping missions these days.

But on the other hand, what we see around us is more crime, drugs and violence and more personal problems than ever before, especially among our young people. Juvenile delinquency, school violence and school drop-outs are the major problems that our society faces. There is more youth crime, more use of drugs and to make it worse -- those involved are becoming younger and younger all the time. More and more children and teenagers are joining the circles of crime, drugs and violence.

There is no simple solution. But surely one of the best ways to fight it is through education, love and care. With the help of young and caring students who will act as role models for these youngsters, we will be able to take them off the streets and prevent them from falling into those dangerous routes.

It is true and right for Israel, as it is for the rest of the world.

Education

In a Utopian state all citizens will surely be able to enjoy, free of charge, those basic services most countries wish to provide their citizens with: security (internal and external) health, employment, housing and education.

Unfortunately, no country in today's world can supply them all, or even most of them, free of charge. Everyone has to pay for these services, either through taxation or by direct payment. As someone who has been involved in the funding of education throughout most

Holland where a university education is free. Israel does not enjoy that privilege and the cost of university studies is quite high. But maybe our way is the right way to go.

In today's world we are accustomed to paying for about everything. If it is for a common or national goal -- then we pay through taxation -- and, where it is for private purposes, through individual payment.

Why, I would like you to consider, should we think any differently when the subject is education? At least think, again, about the definition of what we call education.

I believe there is a great difference between 'education' -- that is the acquiring of basic knowledge, which every citizen in a modern world must have -- and 'higher education' -- the process of acquiring a profession. Why should a country pay for the higher education of students, many of whom come from the middle class and upper strata of society, and who, in many cases, study professions which are not needed? I know there is the academic freedom to choose and the powers of the free market, but these are very slow to react and, in the meantime, the public pays for thousands of needless lawyers, dentists, architects and others.

Needy students, those who do not have the means to study, are the ones who should get the help and support of their country, and this is what the state of Israel is doing. The government and many different public and private organizations offer scholarships to students in need, so that they may have an equal opportunity and start to acquire a profession, like their peers.

Israel

On October 26th 1998 a large-scale strike started in Israel, involving almost 150,000 men and women. The reason -- as always -- was money. The government, which was their rival, said no. The sums demanded were impossible and the budget was already stretched to its limits. It was a fierce strike, with closing of roads and junctions, tyre burning, police intervention, force, TV coverage and thousands of words in editorials and commentary columns. The public was in favor of the strikers. Negotiations began and lasted long days and nights, involving key figures, including even the prime minister himself. But the Treasury held firm - more money will be given on

On December 6th, after six, long weeks of struggle, the strikers gave up. The battle was lost.

The strikers were the university and college students of Israel. What they asked for was to reduce, quite dramatically, the cost of university tuition (which is quite high in Israel). But they came out of the strike with mainly one gain - it is called Perach, a tutorial project.

“There are no free lunches” is a slogan which we have learned from the richest country in the world. There is a price for everything and those who enjoy public funds should give back to the public. Let’s provide students with scholarships to help them through their studies but, on the other hand, expect them work serving the community in return.

Everyone pays. Those who are ready to serve are being helped, the money works twice!!

Perach

Thousands of years ago King Solomon claimed that “Mentoring a child according to his ability and needs” is one of the best ways to advance and encourage him to achieve and perform better in studies and society. The Chinese and the Greeks (remember Mentor the great scholar and teacher), followed him with the same basic ideas.

Perach was established 25 years ago to work out these ideas. Perach means 'flower' in Hebrew, but it is also an acronym for a 'tutorial project'.

For years, Israel's social challenge has been to create a real melting pot in which at least the younger generation will get equal opportunities for a better future. In a small and troubled country, such as ours, it was essential to prevent too deep a social and educational gap, and to act towards this goal, fast.

Israeli university students face a different type of problem: many of them have difficulty meeting the high cost of tuition.

Perach was created to ensure that as many Israeli youngsters as possible -- from kindergarten to graduate school -- will fulfill their potential. University students spend a few hours each week, tutoring, helping and motivating underprivileged children. In return, they receive a scholarship covering approximately half of their university tuition.

Today it is difficult to imagine Israeli student life without PERACH. Almost 20% of all Israeli university students are enrolled in PERACH, and many more are turned down due to lack of funds. This year we had 43,000 applications, and we could only accommodate about 23,000 of them.

What started 25 years ago as a small experimental tutorial project has grown to become a large (probably the largest of its kind in the world) educational, cultural and social scheme.

PERACH means more than helping children and providing fellowships for university students. PERACH symbolizes the deep commitment made by Israeli governments, universities and students to meet the social needs of the community.

How is this being done? Let's get a bit deeper into it.

Martin Luther king had a dream. I too have a dream:

It is my personal belief and hope that a T&M scheme will be instituted in every country. That an international movement which has begun under the leadership of BP will be developed, to encompass millions of students and children around the globe. It certainly can become a social and educational programme that no nation and the world at large has known before. In numbers, depth and impact. A programme in which there are no losers. Just winners.

The movement is gaining momentum and may become the next millennium's largest serious, profound and positive students' revolution.

It is very important to me that you don't go home thinking of PERACH as, "Wow, look what they have achieved". I want you to say to yourself "If they could do it in their tiny country we can do better." And you can!

Think of it - if just 20%, 15%, 10% of your students get involved in such a scheme -- according to your needs -- what a tremendous impact it will have on the lives of individuals and the community at large.

In October 2000 Israel will host an international conference on T&M and student involvement in the community. There is a saying: "Next year in Jerusalem", so I do hope to see you all there next year.

Amos Carmeli has been the National Director of Israel's PERACH Tutorial Project for 18 years. Before his involvement with Perach Amos held a succession of senior positions within his country's education system. Today, from Perach's main office in the Weizmann Institute of Science, he oversees the daily operation of over 550 regular employees, working in eight regional centers located in Israel's universities, supervising more than 23,000 peer tutors working in 800 schools. His job entails all facets of administration and education, including management of personnel, budgeting, research projects, training programmes, supervision and follow-up activities, as well as contacts with governmental ministries and agencies, municipal authorities and institutes of higher learning.

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