

ARI RATH PREIS FÜR KRITISCHEN JOURNALISMUS 2023

PREISTRÄGERIN NOA LANDAU, *Haaretz*

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I am very honored to receive this year's ARI RATH PRIZE FOR CRITICAL JOURNALISM and on behalf of myself and Haaretz I wish to thank the BRUNO KREISKY FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE, the selection committee, and, of course, dear Alexandra, for her wonderful heartwarming speech. Congratulations to Christa as well!

It is wonderful to be in such a supportive environment for critical journalism. Especially during these turbulent days when free, independent & critical press is under growing attack in so many places around the world. Unfortunately, in Israel as well.

I did not have the pleasure to know Ari personally, since he spent much of his time here in Austria in later years. But I did read some of his writings and worked with many of his former colleagues from The Jerusalem Post, who came to establish Haaretz's English edition after The Jerusalem Post was sold to a conservative media mogul in 1989.

About 30 of the Post's top editors and reporters resigned when it became clear the new-owner's intentions were to blatantly intervene in their journalistic work and shift the paper's editorial line to the hard-right. Some of them, led by the late David Landau, joined Haaretz, and a few years ago I had the privilege to be their colleague as the editor of our English edition.

This plot, to seize control of the Post, was pushed forward, back then, by a young politician named Benjamin Netanyahu. This was the first of his many endeavors to change Israel's media landscape. A life-mission that has now put him on trial, for allegedly promising regulatory benefits in-exchange for positive coverage on a national news-site.

Ari, then the editor-in-chief of the Post, left the paper in 1989 as well. He was the first victim of the first hostile takeover of an Israeli media outlet, designed to forcibly change its politics in order to promote a more nationalist agenda that aligns with the ruling party and its leaders. This major juncture in Ari's professional journey also symbolizes in many ways the first out of many red flags, signaling Israel was about to face a massive clash between its Jewish, nationalist, identity and those who envision it as a more liberal, democratic, country.

As Alexandra wrote in her beautiful obituary for Ari in Der Standard, he belonged of course to the second group – of those who hoped for a more liberal Israel – and so, in his last years, he was extremely worried about the political developments in the country. I am sure he would be even more so if he was still with us today.

Ari's politics were of course deeply shaped by his own past as a Holocaust survivor. He had to escape Vienna at the age of 13.

In 1988, the late Professor Yehuda Elkana published a brilliant essay in Haaretz, in which he wrote:

“Two people came, symbolically, out of Auschwitz: A minority who claim ‘this will never happen again’ and a frightened and anxious majority who claim ‘this will never happen to us again’”.

The particular lesson vs. the universal lesson. The nationalist lesson vs. the liberal lesson. The Jewish state vs. the democratic state. And so on.

Ari, like Bruno Kreisky, which he knew and appreciated, belong therefore also to those who saw the universal-liberal message above the particular-nationalist lesson of history.

As the granddaughter of four Holocaust survivors, I was always haunted and fascinated at the same time, by these two very different political perspectives drawn from the same human tragedy and shared history.

From an early age, growing up in an modern-orthodox religious community in Jerusalem, I also had difficulties to understand what I saw as in-con-sis-ten-cies between the self-portrait of modern Judaism as a pluralist and tolerant religion – In contrast to its contemporary political applications which often degrades women, for example, but also non-Jews, and above all Palestinians.

My semi-liberal religious all-girls school, taught us that “there are 70 faces to the Torah”. Which means there are many sides and interpretations to every biblical text. It is a culture of polemics and questions. It shaped my critical thinking. But over time I realized not all questions were allowed. So my critical nature, the skepticism, carried me out of religion and into journalism more than 20 years ago. Because journalism, is the epitome of critical thinking. In journalism, you can enjoy the amazing perk of mostly asking. All great and important stories begin with a simple question mark.

I think the term “critical journalism” is actually axiomatic. There is no such thing as uncritical journalism. Critical thinking is the foundation stone of journalism. The most important quality for every journalist worldwide.

As a journalist, I always try to remind myself, and others, never to take anything for granted and to repeatedly question the veracity of conventions – even, and especially, when these conventions are deeply rooted in our own society or even ourselves.

And Haaretz was, and still is, the ultimate outlet in Israel for this kind of unapologetic journalism. As former President Barak Obama once said about Haaretz: “It has never been afraid to speak truth to power”.

Under our publisher’s leadership, the Schocken family, Haaretz became the beacon of critical journalism in Israel. Our current publisher, Amos Schocken, once told Haaretz subscribers: “Sometimes being critical is an act of support”. Or in other words, when you truly love someone – you tell them the truth.

It is never an easy task to hold a mirror up to your readers, but in recent years it is becoming even more difficult. Factually documenting the reality on the other side of the nonexistent border, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, is considered a taboo in vast parts of the country. But we insist on publishing these facts, and thought-provoking opinions, even throughout a hostile and even violent environment.

This struggle is not unique to Israel. We are all living in the age of post-World War Two. Following years of great liberal achievements – such as the foundation of the multilateral institutions and international law, led by many like Rath and Kreisky themselves who sought to promote the universal-liberal lesson to the Holocaust – we are now seeing an Anti-liberal backslide. A backlash. In many parts of the world, including in Europe, including here, in Austria.

These Anti-liberal forces are always aiming first at three major democratic institutions: The judiciary, academia – and the press.

Ari lived it before many others. It is our duty to continue the fight. Here, in Israel, wherever needed. To do so we need to align and learn from each other, in the same ways the Anti-liberal forces form their own alliances. It is ironic, you know, how so called Anti-globalists are the most global of all. And that is, again, why I am very happy to be here today and receive your support, together with a great journalist colleague.

Lastly, on a more hopeful note, maybe, I would like to say that as Israel is marking this week its 75th anniversary, we are witnessing the country’s biggest liberal protest in years. So many are out to fight this extreme government’s plan for a judicial overhaul. A plan that will change Israel’s political system for ever, giving the executive branch unlimited power over the judiciary, in order to shift the court’s rulings in a way that would put human rights values in second priority to nationalist values.

This protest movement accedes all expectations, in terms of numbers, energy and determination. It is not a progressive camp, it’s a more of a center leaning liberal-democratic camp. But it is braver and louder than ever before. We are seeing a rare moment in our country’s history, a crossroad, that might, potentially, lead to a better future. The kind of future Ari Rath maybe hoped for.

I can only hope that in the next 75 years, we will at least be able to look back at this rare moment, and feel like we did everything possible to achieve that future. Haaretz has an important role in that pivotal moment – and we are all doing our best to rise to this challenge. Thank you.