

Mohammed R. Mhawish Speech

Good evening, everyone.

I want to start with a confession — not the kind that gets journalists fired, but the kind that makes them laugh: when I heard I had won the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism, I assumed someone sent the email to the wrong Mohammed.

I refreshed the inbox three times just to be sure.

And then the reality sank in: the weight of what it means to be a Palestinian journalist standing on this stage, after two years of covering Gaza through one of the darkest periods in our recent history.

Awards feel strange when you come from a place where survival itself feels like an accomplishment.

But I'm grateful. Truly. And I carry this gratitude with the same care I carry a pencil or notebook in my bombed-out home.

1

Many journalists talk about “finding” journalism.
But in my case, journalism found me.

I was born and raised in Gaza — a place the world often flattens into headlines, statistics, political metaphors, or worse, silence. But for me, Gaza has always been a place of astonishing

complexity: loud laughter, endless tea, stubborn hope, and a people who insist on living even when the world insists on reducing them to conflict.

Journalism, for me, began as a form of **witnessing**. As a teenager, I wrote because I was afraid that if we didn't document our own lives, someone else would write over them. And let's be honest — they usually did.

When your childhood is shaped by siege and airstrikes, storytelling becomes an instinct. It becomes a way of measuring time. A way of saying: *We were here. We lived. We mattered.*

2

In the past two years, I've reported for The New Yorker, The Nation, Al Jazeera, The Economist, MSNBC, and others.

Those bylines traveled far. But the road to those stories — that path is full of things that don't appear in print:

- evacuating yet again because the neighborhood was bombed
- calling colleagues to check if they're alive
- losing power, losing signal, losing another friend
- watching news of your own city announced by anchors who seem more comfortable with numbers than names
- writing through exhaustion so heavy it numbed the hands

War reporting is often framed as heroic. But there is nothing glamorous about trying to file a story while the walls shake.

Nothing noble about writing obituaries for your colleagues.

Nothing career-enhancing about learning how to recognize the sound of different missiles.

People ask me, “How do you stay objective?”

And I say: *Objectivity is not detachment. It's the discipline to tell the truth even when the truth breaks your heart.*

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behind every byline, there is a story of what it took to get that story out:

There is the moment you interview a family that survived a bombing — then walk home and discover that a building down the street collapsed on people you knew.

There is the surreal task of writing a breaking-news alert about an airstrike — while the dust from that same strike is still settling on your clothes.

There is the numbness that settles after weeks of reporting without rest, the moment you stop reacting to explosions because your body is too tired to feel fear.

There is the journalist friend who disappears from the group chat — and you don't ask why, because you know the answer will hurt.

There is the day you learn that a colleague was killed. And then another. And then another.

And you keep reporting because stopping feels like betrayal.

People sometimes think journalists grow desensitized.

No. We grow compartmentalized.

Emotion stacks up silently, dangerously — like debris.

I carried that debris for months.

Some of it, I still carry.

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3

I lost friends in Gaza. I lost colleagues — journalists who carried cameras and notebooks like I did.

Some of them were younger than me. Some were fathers. Some were still learning the craft. All of them believed that telling the truth mattered enough to risk everything.

Their names rarely appear in Western tributes to press freedom. But they were the bravest journalists I have ever known.

I carry them with me tonight.

Their work, unfinished.

Their stories were cut short.

Their courage is a compass I return to again and again.

If anything in my reporting has resonated with readers, it is because I carried their voices with mine.

4

People think Palestinians don't laugh.

Let me clarify something: we laugh at everything.

We laugh because the alternative is crying and crying requires energy we rarely have.

We laugh at the absurdity of living under blockade.

We laugh at the irony of losing WiFi in the middle of an airstrike.

We laugh because laughter is the last act of freedom we own.

So yes, I bring humor into my work — not because war is funny, but because Palestinians are human. Humor is part of our survival kit, right between stubbornness and unbelievable amounts of coffee.

When I write, I try to honor that — our grief, but also our wit. Our trauma, but also our endless improvisation.

5

Let me be honest: reporting as a Palestinian for international outlets is a... unique experience.

You are often:

- explaining your existence
- clarifying that you are indeed a credible witness to your own reality
- fighting to have basic facts acknowledged

- and rewriting sentences you know will be scrutinized more than the military operation you're describing

Sometimes editors ask questions you can only answer with a long, quiet sigh.

Sometimes you feel the pressure to sanitize grief, to flatten pain into paragraphs that won't make readers uncomfortable.

But social justice journalism — real social justice journalism — means refusing to flatten the human story.

It means pushing past euphemisms.

It means naming things as they are, not as governments would prefer them to be.

It means saying “civilians,” not “collateral damage.”

It means saying “children,” not “statistics.”

It means writing in a way that honors memory, not geopolitics.

6

This award is meaningful not because it recognizes me, but because it recognizes **the kind of work many try to avoid**: work rooted in lived experience, in survival, in documenting the violence of systems that thrive on silence.

James Aronson believed in journalism as a public service — journalism that didn't behave, didn't apologize, and didn't ask for permission to tell the truth.

That resonates deeply with me as a Palestinian journalist.

In Gaza, journalism is a national responsibility.

It is a form of resistance.

It is a way of refusing erasure.

It is how we insist on being seen.

To receive an award named after someone who believed in the power of an informed people — that is an honor that reaches far beyond my own career.

7

I have written about destroyed homes, displaced families, mass graves, hunger, grief.

But I have also written about love, humor, survival, and the unshakable humanity people hold onto even in the ruins.

Witnessing is not about tragedy.

Witnessing is about honoring the full human story.

And witnessing changes you.

It changes the pace of your heartbeat.

It changes the way you walk into a room.

It changes the way you understand silence.

Sometimes, after reporting, I sit alone and try to absorb everything I heard.

Sometimes it takes days.

Sometimes it takes months.

Sometimes I still haven't processed it.

But every story is an act of trust.
And that trust is sacred.

8

People call journalists courageous.
But I've met mothers in Gaza who showed more courage in one hour than I have in years of reporting.

I've met fathers digging through rubble with their hands.
I've met children who memorized the safest corners of their homes.

I've met teachers turning classrooms into shelters.
I've met doctors who worked until their hands stopped functioning.

They are courage.
We are only the ones writing it down.

9

Tonight, I want to honor:

- the journalists in Gaza who continue to report with almost no equipment, no safety, no guarantees
- the colleagues I lost — whose dreams, humor, and talent live in every story I tell
- the readers who searched for Gaza not as a geopolitical subject but as a human place
- the editors who trusted me — especially when my writing came from grief or exhaustion

- and my family, whose resilience taught me everything I know about surviving the unimaginable

I wouldn't be here without them.

A Message to Young Journalists

To the young journalists here,
Let me speak to you directly.

I know what it feels like to be told your story is too political, too emotional, too biased simply because it is yours.

I know what it feels like to have editors question truths you lived through.

I know what it feels like to report through grief so deep it threatens to silence you.

I know what it feels like to worry that no one will care.

But let me tell you something with my whole heart:

Your voice is needed.

Your perspective is needed.

Your truth is needed.

Your courage is needed.

The next generation of journalism will be shaped by people who refuse to accept the old rules of who gets to tell whose stories.

You are part of that generation.

And you will redefine journalism not by imitating the voices before you, but by bringing your full self — your community, your history, your humor, your pain, your vision — to the craft.

Don't shrink to fit an outdated idea of "objectivity."

Don't let anyone convince you that your lived experience is a bias.

Your lived experience is expertise.

You belong in newsrooms.

You belong in the field.

You belong in the global conversation.

And when the world feels too heavy — remember you are not alone. You have a lineage behind you. You have a community beside you. And you have a responsibility ahead of you that is bigger than fear.

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10

This award is a reminder — a very public reminder — of why I do this work:

Because stories matter.

Because truth matters.

Because people deserve to be seen.

Because Gaza is more than destruction.

Because memory is a form of resistance.

Because journalism, when done with integrity, is a form of love
— fierce, demanding, and profoundly human.

Tonight, I carry Gaza with me.

I carry its losses.

I carry its laughter.

I carry its people.

I carry the names of the journalists we lost.

I carry the stories that survived and the ones that didn't.

And I carry the responsibility — to report and to honor.

Thank you for this award.

Thank you for recognizing the kind of journalism that does not
look away.

And thank you for believing, as James Aronson did, that an
informed people are a powerful people.

Good night — and thank you.