An Antiwar Movement Grows in Israel

A few months after the 1967 war, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a professor at Hebrew University and a leading Israeli intellectual—who was also an observant Jew—stated that Israel must immediately withdraw from the occupied territories. He argued that the occupation was unjust and would inevitably lead to the oppression and subjugation of the Palestinians, and to the collapse if not destruction of Israeli society. Until his death in the mid-1990s, he continued to criticize the occupation, using piercing, prophetic language to condemn the immorality of Israeli policies. For years, Leibowitz also averred that if 500 reservist soldiers would simultaneously refuse to serve in the territories, the occupation would end.

The fifty combat officers and soldiers who announced—in an open letter published on January 25 in the Israeli press—that they would no longer serve in the territories were in many ways following Leibowitz’s advice. Already, 125 more soldiers have signed, among them sergeants, lieutenants, captains and even a few colonels (see www.seruv.org.il/default.asp for the full list). Thousands of Israelis have called a hotline to express support for the group and to donate money to help it publish ads in local papers, while Yesh Gvul (“There Is a Limit”), started by Israelis who refused to serve in Lebanon twenty years ago, is distributing leaflets urging others to join the soldiers’ action. A group of women is organizing a petition, claiming that reserve officers are not the only ones carrying the burdens of occupation, while a number of twelfth graders, who will be drafted this coming summer, have also announced that they will not serve in the territories.

The fact that the letter has created such a stir both inside the military establishment and in society at large has to do with the profile of those who initiated it: These are not radical leftists but rather people affiliated with Israel’s political center and members of the social elite. They have experienced firsthand the effect of the occupation, so their views cannot be dismissed.

Shuki Sadeh, a paratrooper reservist who was among the signers, told a newspaper how he had seen an Israeli soldier kill a young Palestinian boy at a distance of 150 meters. “What angered me at the time,” Sadeh explained, “was that our soldiers said, ‘Well, that’s another Arab who has disappeared.’” Ariel Shavit, an artillery master sergeant recently on duty in the Gaza Strip, recalled that while it’s claimed that the Palestinians shoot first and Israelis just respond, in reality, “We would start shooting and they would fire back.”

The Israeli military has been shaken by the letter—not least because the soldiers are discrediting the Israeli depiction of the conflict and exposing the army’s excessive use of force—and is now trying to prevent the “damage” from spreading. Rami Kaplan, one signer, has been demoted from his position as deputy commander of a reserve tank battalion, and other signers have been notified that they, too, will be stripped of their commissions. Yigal Bronner, a Sanskrit scholar who serves in a tank unit and also signed the letter, says, “It is as if both sides [the military and refuseniks] believe Leibowitz’s prophecy... the soldiers are committed to amassing 500 conscientious objectors, while the Israeli government and military are afraid that if they do, the occupation will actually end.”

NEVE GORDON
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EXCERPTS FROM THE OPEN LETTER

We, reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, who were raised upon the principles of Zionism, sacrifice and giving to the people of Israel and to the State of Israel, who have always served in the front lines, and who were the first to carry out any mission, light or heavy, in order to protect the State of Israel and strengthen it;
We, combat officers and soldiers, have been on reserve duty all over the occupied territories, and were issued commands and directives that had nothing to do with the security of our country, and that had the sole purpose of perpetuating our control over the Palestinian people. We, whose eyes have seen the bloody toll this occupation exacts from both sides;
We, who sensed how the commands issued to us in the territories destroyed all the values we had absorbed while growing up in this country;
We, who understand now that the price of occupation is the loss of the IDF’s human character and the corruption of the entire Israeli society;
We, who know that the territories are not Israel, and that all settlements are bound to be evacuated in the end;
We hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this War of the Settlements;
We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people;
We hereby declare that we shall continue serving in the Israel Defense Forces in any mission that serves Israel’s defense;
The missions of occupation and oppression do not serve this purpose and we shall take no part in them.

EXCERPTS FROM THE LEAFLET

SOLDIER:
We all want to defend our country. We’re all sick and tired of terrorism. We all want peace. But do our actions permit an end to the cycle of bloodshed?
Since 1967, Israel has ruled over 3.5 million Palestinians, running their lives by means of a forcible occupation, with continual violations of human rights.

Ask yourself whether your actions in the course of your military service enhance national security? Or do those actions merely fuel the enmity and the acts of violence between us and our Palestinian neighbors?

SOLDIER: THE OCCUPATION BREEDS TERRORISM!
When you take part in extrajudicial killings ("liquidation," in the army’s terms), when you take part in demolishing residential homes, when you open fire at unarmed civilian population or residential homes, when you uproot orchards, when you interdict food supplies or medical treatment, you are taking part in actions defined in international conventions (such as the 4th Geneva Convention) and in Israeli law as war crimes.

Soldier, is there a people anywhere in the world that will not resist an occupation regime? If you were in the Palestinians’ shoes, would you be willing to bow your head to a foreign ruler?

SOLDIER: THE OCCUPATION UNDERMINES OUR COUNTRY
The occupation and the violence that it prompts drag the economy down into recession. Investors are in flight, tourists stay away, entire sections of the economy are in collapse.

SOLDIER: IT’S IN YOUR HANDS!
That night, I was a bit drunk. We sat around drinking in honor of Daniel who came all the way from France and made aliyah so he could faithfully serve the country, the army and Tali, the female military social worker. We uncorked a Johnny Walker that Tali’s brother gave her, and we were listening to the Doors while smoking some hashish. You can’t be a real Nahal Corps soldier without drinking Johnny Walker, listening to the Doors, or smoking hashish. And the select few partake in all three… We’d just gotten back from Lebanon, and after a week of R&R we were sent right to the territories, to Gaza.

There’s no place like Gaza. With its blue sea and excellent hummus which even if you include a ton of pita bread, cracked olives and French fries won’t cost you more than 10 shekels, you’d even get back some change. Let me tell you about these Gazan olives. First of all, they are the most bitter ones in the entire world. Gaza people say that the olives get their bitterness from life in the Gaza strip. From the pressure of our occupation and the previous one and the one before that. And not only are these olives bitter, they can also drive you crazy with their saltiness. And that is because of the tears of the Gaza women. Tears they shed in the olive groves seep through into the olives.

The women of Gaza were the true heroes. While the men were busy tending to the miseries of life and looking for ways to liberate themselves from this or that occupation, the women were busy taking care of the kids, preparing the food and working in the groves. In the groves they had quality time. All alone there, they cried for their youth and for their dreams, for the sons who were killed or sent to prison, or for the sons who will be killed or will be sent to prison.

And the olives – they took it all in which – contrary to general opinion – made them taste great and go very well with Whisky. Suddenly I thought about my mother who doesn’t sleep at night.

I tried to explain to her that all we did was drink Whisky and eat cracked olives. But she didn’t believe me, my mother, and began to cry.

She said she was scared. That she had bad dreams. Mom and her dreams. I told her not to worry and not to cry because if she did, the water in the Israeli aquifer would get salty and it would be her fault. This is what happened in Gaza and that’s why they are oppressed and occupied. It did not help, though. There’s no one like mom.

Tali said that Jim Morrison was King and started dancing. She was so beautiful, Tali! With her direct manners and her flat stomach and her breasts with the nipples that stood up like two small hills in the prairie. Daniel joined her and they kissed. I sat by myself and thought how Daniel was a victim of life. A human being whose life got screwed up and no one was paying attention.

Last week, during the demonstration near the green mosque, Daniel accidentally fired some shots into the crowd and some pregnant Gaza woman was killed. I ran to her trying to provide some help, but she was already dying. She gave me a sad look and had tears in her eyes. She had a fifth month belly, and I knew she’d lost the baby. She was bleeding heavily from the abdomen and it took me a while to insert the IV and start the transfusion. Then she died at 6:00 PM. Roni, the MD, and I began to cry. Manny, the driver, mumbled that she was just an Arab. Dead, so what? But he too was sad and I could see he was having a hard time with it. I kissed him on his forehead and told him to drive to
headquarters. No one said a word to Daniel.

There was an investigation and it was decided that this had been a mistake. An accidental bullet. But no one talked to Daniel. I told Roni that Daniel needs some time off, that we need to talk to him, that he seemed strange. But Roni was busy and we were all busy: there were more demonstrations and more people got killed and I felt as if I was slowly going crazy. They taught us to fire our rifles, to set up ambushes, jump from an airplane, carry our gear, run, fall, run again. They forgot to teach us to talk, cry, forgive ourselves. Daniel looked at Tali, gave her another kiss, and said that he was stepping out for a second to take a leak.

I asked him if he wanted some company. Nah, he said, stay here and keep and eye on Tali for me. I stayed with Tali.

After a minute, we heard a shot.

Tal Belo
Asaf Oron's statement (Translated by Amichai Kronfeld)

On February 5, 1985, I got up, left my home, went to the Compulsory Service Center on Rashi Street in Jerusalem, said goodbye to my parents, boarded the rickety old bus going to the Military Absorption Station and turned into a soldier.

Exactly seventeen years later, I find myself in a head-to-head confrontation with the army, while the public at large jeers and mocking me from the sidelines. Right wingers see me as a traitor who is dodging the holy war that's just around the corner. The political center shakes a finger at me self-righteously and lectures me about undermining democracy and politicizing the army. And the left? The square establishment, "moderate" left that only yesterday was courting my vote now turns its back on me as well. Everyone blabbers about what is and what is not legitimate, exposing in the process the depth of their ignorance of political theory and their inability to distinguish a real democracy from a third world regime in the style of Juan Perón.

Almost no one asks the main question: why would a regular guy get up one morning in the middle of life, work, the kids and decide he's not playing the game anymore? And how come he is not alone but there are fifty... I beg your pardon, a hundred... I beg your pardon again, now a most two hundred regular, run of the mill guys like him who've done the same thing?

Our parents' generation lets out a sigh: we've embarrassed them yet again. But isn't it all your fault? What did you raise us on? Universal ethics and universal justice, on the one hand: peace, liberty and equality to all. And on the other hand: "the Arabs want to throw us into the sea." "They are all crafty and primitive. You can't trust them." On the one hand, the songs of John Lennon, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Pink Floyd. Songs of peace and love and against militarism and war.

On the other hand, songs about a sweetheart riding the tank after sunset in the field: "The tank is yours and you are ours." [allusions to popular Israeli songs – AK]. I was raised on two value systems: one was the ethical code and the other the tribal code, and I naively believed that the two could coexist.

This is the way I was when I was drafted. Not enthusiastic, but as if embarking on a sacred mission of courage and sacrifice for the benefit of society. But when, instead of a sacred mission, a 19 year old finds himself performing the sacrilege of violating human beings' dignity and freedom, he doesn't dare ask – even himself – if it's OK or not. He simply acts like everyone else and tries to blend in. As it is, he's got enough problems, and boy is the weekend far off.

You get used to it in a hurry, and many even learn to like it. Where else can you go out on patrol – that is, walk the streets like a king, harass and humiliate pedestrians to your heart's content, and get into mischief with your buddies – and at the same time feel like a big hero defending your country? The Gaza Exploits became heroic tales, a source of pride for Giv'ati, then a relatively new brigade suffering from low self-esteem.

For a long time, I could not relate to the whole "heroism" thing. But when, as a sergeant, I found myself in charge, something cracked inside me. Without thinking, I turned into the perfect occupation enforcer. I settled accounts with "upstarts" who didn't show enough respect. I tore up the personal documents of men my father's age. I hit, harassed, served as a bad example – all in the city of Kalkilia, barely three miles from grandma and grandpa's home-sweet-home. No, I
was no "aberration." I was exactly the norm.

Having completed my compulsory service, I was discharged, and then the first Intifada began (how many more await us?) Of er a comrade in arms who remained in the service has become a hero: the hero of the second Giv'ati trial. He commanded a company that dragged a detained Palestinian demonstrator into a dark orange grove and beat him to death. As the verdict stated, Ofer was found to have been the leader in charge of the whole business. He spent two months in jail and was demoted — I think that was the most severe sentence given an Israeli soldier through the entire first Intifada, in which about a thousand Palestinians were killed. Ofer's battalion commander testified that there was an order from the higher echelons to use beatings as a legitimate method of punishment, thereby implicating himself. On the other hand, Ef il Tam, the brigade commander, who had been seen beating Arabs on numerous occasions, denied that he ever gave such an order and consequently was never indicted. Today he lectures us on moral conduct on his way to a new life in politics. (In the current Intifada, incidentally, the vast majority of incidents involving Palestinian deaths are not even investigated. No one even bothers.)

And in the meantime, I was becoming more of a civilian. A copy of The Yellow Wind [a book on life in the Occupied Territories by the Israeli writer David Grossman, available in English — AK] which had just come out, crossed my path. I read it, and suddenly it hit me. I finally understood what I had done over there. What I had been over there.

I began to see that they had cheated me: They raised me to believe there was someone up there taking care of things. Someone who knows stuff that is beyond me, the little guy. And that even if sometimes politicians let us down, the "military echelon" is always on guard, day and night, keeping us safe, each and every one of their decisions is the result of sacred necessity. Yes, they cheated us, the soldiers of the Intifadas, exactly as they had cheated the generation that was beaten to a pulp in the War of Attrition and in the Yom Kippur War, exactly as they had cheated the generation that sank deep into the Lebanese mud during the Lebanon invasions. And our parents' generation continues to be silent.

Worse still, I understood that I was raised on two contradictory value systems. I think most people discover even at an earlier age they must choose between two value systems: an abstract, demanding one that is no fun at all and that is very difficult to verify, and another which calls to you from every corner — determining who is up and who is down, who is king and who is pariah, who is one of us and who is our enemy. Contrary to basic common sense, I picked the first. Because in this country the cost-effective analysis comparing one system to another is so one-sided, I can't blame those who choose the second.

I picked the first road, and found myself volunteering in a small, smoke-filled office in East Jerusalem, digging up files about deaths, brutality, bureaucratic viciousness or simply daily harassments. I felt I was a toning, to some extent, for my actions during my days with the Giv'ati Brigade. But it also felt as if I was trying to empty the ocean out with a teaspoon.

Out of the blue, I was called up for the very first time for reserve duty in the Occupied Territories. Hysterically, I contacted my company commander. He calmed me down: We will be staying at an outpost overlooking the Jordan river. No contacts with the local population is expected. And that indeed was what I did, but some of my friends provided security for the Damia Bridge terminal [where Palestinians cross from Jordan to Israel and vice versa — AK]. This was in the days preceding the Gulf War and a large number of Palestinian refugees were flowing from Kuwait to the Occupied Territories (from the frying pan into the fire). The reserve soldiers — mostly right wingers — cringed when they saw the female conscripts stationed in the terminal, happily ripping open down-comforters and
babies’ coats to make sure they didn’t contain explosives. I too cringed when I 
heard their stories, but I was also hopeful: reserve soldiers are human after all, 
whatever their political views.

Such hopes were dashed three years later, when I spent three weeks with a 
celebrated reconnaissance company in the confiscated ruins of a villa at the 
outskirts of the A Basans (if you don’t know where this is, it’s your problem). This is 
where it became clear to me that the same humane reserve soldier could also be 
an ugly, wretched macho undergoing a total regression back to his days as a young conscript. A ready on the bus ride to the Gaza trip, the soldiers were 
competing with each other: whose “heroic” tales of murderous beatings during the 
Intifada were better (in case you missed this point: the beatings were literally 
murderous: beating to death). Going on patrol duty with these guys once was all 
that I could take. I went up to the placement officer and requested to be given 
guard duty only. Placement officers like people like me: most soldiers can’t tolerate 
staying inside the base longer than a couple of hours.

Thus began the nausea and shame routine, a routine that lasted three tours 
refusal routine. For several weeks at a time I would turn into a hidden “prisoner of 
conscience,” guarding an outpost or a godforsaken transmitter on top of some 
mountain, a recluse. I was ashamed to tell most of my friends why I chose to 
serve this way. I didn’t have the energy to hear them get on my case for being 
such a “wishy washy” softy. I was also ashamed of myself: this was as the easy way 
out. In short, I was a shamed soldier. I did “save my own soul.” I was not directly 
engaged in wrongdoing — only made it possible for others to do so while I kept 
guard. Why didn’t I refuse outright? I don’t know. It was partly the pressure to 
conform, partly the political process that gave us a glimmer of hope that the whole 
occupation business would be over soon. More than anything, it was my curiosity 
to see actually what was going on over there.

And precisely because I knew so well, first hand, from years of experience 
what was going on over there, what reality was like over there, I had no trouble 
seeing, through the fog of war, and the curtain of lies, what has been taking place 
over there since the very first days of the second Intifada. For years, the army had 
been feeding on lines like “We were too nice in the first Intifada,” and “If we had 
only killed a hundred in the very first days, everything would have been different.” 
Now the army was given license to do things its way. I knew full well that [former 
Prime Minister] Ehud Barak was giving the army free hand, and that [current Chief 
of Staff] Shaul Mofaz was taking full advantage of this to maximize the bloodshed.

By then, I had two little kids, boys, and I knew from experience that no one 
—not a single person in the entire world—will ever make sure that my sons won’t 
have to serve in the Occupied Territories when they reach 18. No one, that is, 
except me. And no one but me will have to look them in the eye when they’re all 
grown up and tell them where dad was when all that happened. It was clear to me: 
this time I was not going.

Initially, this was a quiet decision, still a little shy, something like “I am just a 
bit weird, can’t go and can’t talk about it too much either.” But as time went by, as 
the level of insanity, hatred, and incitement kept rising, as the generals were 
turning the Israeli Defense Forces into a terror organization, the decision was 
turning into an outcry: “If you can’t see that this is one big crime leading us to the 
brink of annihilation, then something is terribly wrong with you!”

And then I discovered that I was not alone. Like discovering life on 
another planet.

The truth is that I understand why everyone is mad at us. We spoiled the 
neat little order of things. The holy Status Quo states that the Right holds the