

**WHY I BROKE THE SILENCE?**

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## On Breaking Silence

Breaking the silence is a process. It calls on us to carefully peel off, one by one, the thick layers of denial and repression that we draped over ourselves, demanding painful recognition of the sad truth of the occupation, and the role we played in its execution. The exact moment that triggered this process is different for each and every one of us: for some of us the decision to break the silence arose in a moment of clarity, and for others it was a longer process of digesting conflicting emotions. For some it was the sense of civic duty, and for others, an eroding sense of unease.

Yet for all of us, breaking the silence was the result of a direct and painful encounter with the occupation. It is the result of realizing that we cannot remain silent in the face of the blatant injustice we saw through the windows of the military jeep, or ignore the plight of those whose homes we forcefully raided in the middle of the night. The act of breaking the silence is our resolution to rise up against injustice, against the repression of freedom, and against the callous hardening of the heart, ever-present in the occupation itself, and in all of us who served it.

The act of breaking the silence is the readiness to carry the burden of responsibility for what we, as soldiers and commanders, did in the occupied territories: for the countless invasions into innocent people's homes, for the pointless checkpoints in the heart of Palestinian villages, for the wreckage we sowed by a slight pull of the trigger, and for that one slap on a man's face that will forever shadow his dignity. For all of that, and more, we take full responsibility.

Yet, in doing so, we demand that Israeli society take responsibility for what it sends us to do. The very society that embraces us as the nation's 'children,' but sends us at age 18 to be foreign rulers over others, without stopping to think what service in the occupied territories actually entails. We demand our society, Israeli society, to listen to our story – as it is their story, too. We expect them to take responsibility and put an end to the occupation.

Breaking the silence confronts us with who we are and what we have become in the aftermath of sipping from the goblet of power and control. The reflection that surfaces often contradicts the image we had of ourselves. When these contradictions are revealed, cracks begin to appear, and these cracks are dangerous as they challenge the blind faith we have in the righteousness of our path. The blind faith that allows many to look away and find excuses for the injustices we have been inflicting on others for the past 50 years and counting. The blind faith that allows us to say that what is wrong is sometimes right, and that for the sake of our so-called 'own good' we are permitted to do evil to others.

We broke the silence because we believe it is our moral duty to speak about the injustices we saw and inflicted. Breaking the silence has compelled us to pose questions about things Israeli society taught us there are no questions to ask. Questions about the IDF being the 'most moral army in the world,' about Israel as a peace loving nation simply protecting itself from the enemy, or about how these disagreements must be resolved solely 'in the family.' When all these question marks appeared we found ourselves standing before a huge abyss, undermining the blind faith that shaped our identity as Israelis and soldiers. And yet we still believe it is our duty to break the silence.

However, the act of breaking silence will not be complete without others breaking their silence – others who were, and still are, part of the prolonged and ever-deepening occupation. Our mission will not be complete until a critical mass of Israeli society will break the silence – a society that in its name and for its sake we have continuously occupied the lands and souls of our neighbors. We broke the silence as we believed that no change were to be possible without acknowledging the responsibility we have toward the reality of the occupation – a reality that deeply disrupts the lives of millions of people under our rule. Without such change, Israel will never become the beacon of truth and justice that we strive for it to be.

## First Sergeant • Haruv Battalion • 2012

We issued an activity on Route \*\*\*\*, which is a route that crosses Ramallah from below. We were told, "Since it's a night route, not supervised much, many terrorists pass through there." We commenced the activity and began to stop vehicles. The first vehicle we stopped had two Palestinians transporting goods, and their Hebrew was good. Their Hebrew seemed too good to me, and they seemed to know too well how to conduct themselves with soldiers, so we checked their vehicle, we asked them to take things out. The next vehicle arrived, a couple on their way to a wedding. We took them out of the car, of course. Every time I talk to someone, my signaler has his weapon pointed at him, at his face. I'm talking to the person and I don't know if he has a knife on him, if he has a million things that could endanger us. He [the signaler] had a bullet in the barrel. The weapon is cocked. You enter Area A with cocked weapons. And then a family arrives. And I'll never forget that family until my dying day. The father and mother got out of the car, and my soldier had his weapon aimed at the father, and they're on their way home from a wedding, and three little girls get out of the car with him. As I'm talking to the father, his little girl is clinging to his leg. I'm standing there, next to me a soldier is pointing his weapon at her father, and the little girl is clinging to his leg. We check the car. My soldier says to me, "Can I turn the weapon away?" I answer, "No, you can't," because of my understanding that we have to conduct this whole thing professionally, to defend ourselves.

### Why did you carry out this mission?

Because they said that we need to have another initiated mission tonight. They said, "You have to go to that route there to set up a checkpoint." You're blocking a route that doesn't have a checkpoint. You're doing a flying checkpoint. Mostly they said that there are many terrorists there, they drive and that's how they smuggle weapons.

"For years now I'm still thinking about it. Did I behave properly during that incident? Should I have opened fire? Did I not need to? Was I right to shout 'be quiet' at some Arab, or was it unnecessary, but definitely that it's not what you're supposed to do in the army. And that's the feeling, a hundred percent, that it's simply not your job"

### Was it a family returning from a wedding?

A family returning from a wedding. Dressed nicely. He was even in a suit, very fancy. And he's standing there at the junction, at 11 PM, with a 20-year-old soldier talking to him, and a 19-year-old soldier pointing a weapon at his face in front of his little girl and his wife, who's standing by the car with a soldier watching her, and that's normative. And then you say – it's normative in his eyes as well. He somehow accepts it, he's treating me in a dignified manner and he simply wants to move on because this is his life. And that's also something you notice at checkpoints: the young kids and Palestinian youth, you can still see the hatred in their eyes. You see it immediately at most checkpoints. But the older people, you see that they're already occupied people. They're people with a twinkle in their eye that doesn't exist, and they plead with you because they know there's no other way. The young people don't plead. The old people plead. "Please, soldier, I want to pass through, I need to work," because they've already gone through so much occupation that they don't have any more strength to resist. Because whoever resisted in their generation is probably no longer around.

## >>> Why I Broke The Silence?

### What do you feel upon your release?

A bit of shame. That's a lie, there's also pride. I'm very proud of myself that I was a combatant, so I finished my service feeling strengthened. But there's a lot of shame, many thoughts afterwards, and for years now I'm still thinking about it. Did I behave properly during that incident? Should I have opened fire? Did I not need to? Was I right to shout 'uskut' (be quiet) at some Arab, or was it unnecessary, but definitely that it's not what you're supposed to do in the army. And that's the feeling, a hundred percent, that it's simply not your job. I was a policeman, but a policeman for only one side, and... I don't know. A lot of hatred for the system. A feeling of being exploited and... That they took everything out of you in impossible conditions, and then it sort of doesn't interest anybody. I thought that I would be a combatant and defend the country, and sometimes you do actually have the feeling that you're defending [the country] from terror, but then when you think about it you realize it isn't exactly [like that].

### So why do you actually think that it's important to break the silence?

Because people have got to know what's going on there. And because people don't know. A hundred percent of the people I talk to, who haven't served there, don't understand – "Oh, the checkpoint isn't

between the [West] Bank and here?" I don't know, I feel that the only way for a society to reach catharsis, to go through a process with itself and accept what it did in order to move on, to enable some sort of process of opening and renewal, it must know what's going on there. If we send our children there, then we shouldn't be surprised that some of them don't take it well, do wrong things, and... behave in a manner we wouldn't want [anyone] to behave toward us. And it's a problem that an entire society programs you, indoctrinates you, at some point in the social limbo, to hate the enemy, to demonize the enemy, and then sends you to rule over it. Every society this ever happened to in history, in every war – terrible things happened. Fifty years is a very long time to rule over the territories without a solution. And we have to talk about it.





There's a story [which] in my eyes is the weirdest, the most messed up and reflects the reality of ruling over civilians for the sake of ruling. Now, I say 'stop' for a second. The army doesn't do it out of an evil will to control human beings. It's just that in order to maintain that situation (military rule in the territories), it's what has to be done. We would enter villages, for example we would enter Zayta. Zayta is a small village without many people. We enter the village, the village center, set up a flying checkpoint. Traffic spikes. A few vehicles, we drive up a small hill, provide cover. What we do is check vehicles. What is checking vehicles? To look in the trunk, to check their IDs, and let them drive away. Now, I don't really know what I'm checking [for]. They told me [to] check IDs, but they didn't give the number of a suspect in the village. And even if Ahmed Yassin was there, I wasn't told about it. Nothing. "Check them, check their vehicle." Now, what exactly am I supposed to check in his vehicle? He's driving in his own village. Even if there were knives there it's, you know, it's like, farmers can also work with them. It's not... They're not even in Israel. So you enter the village, you check them, I don't even know what I'm checking. You cause a traffic jam in a village of about 200-300 residents. You disrupt their daily life. After two hours you just pack up and leave.

#### So what do you check?

Nothing. I don't know what I'm checking at all. As a commander I'm telling you, as the person responsible for the situation, I had no idea what I was doing.

#### What were you told was the purpose of the mission?

Security check.

#### The purpose of which, was?

I don't know, and also on this particular matter I asked for clarifications, I asked to understand what I'm doing. What for? What's the goal? Am I looking for someone? Am I looking for some terrorist?

#### And how do you understand the purpose of the mission?

I think it was just to show them that ours is bigger. In other words, that here we are entering the village and we'll check whomever we want. We'll now enter the village, and everyone will get in line in their cars, and they'll pass through when I tell them to. And that's the gist of it. And as a soldier you don't think about it. The truth is, I only thought about it afterwards. And you know what? I did enter their village, check them, and I didn't have any computer for me to type their ID numbers and check if he, if he's a suspicious person.

#### Who's a suspicious person?

Honestly, listen, I don't even know what to tell you, I'll tell you the truth. I don't know what a suspicious person is inside their own village. It's just people driving around their village. I can pass on [their information] to the operations room, and they'll, like [check], and see if he's a suspicious person or something like that, but generally...

#### Who would you pass on to the operations room?

A young man, a beard would increase the chances, any person who seemed to fit the stereotype of a terrorist, [I would say to myself], "Fine, okay, check his number with the operations room." I, specifically, wouldn't do it as much, but others who were with me did it, like, freely. Not too much though, because ultimately your goal is to get back to the post and chill.



I remember being on the border between Kibbutz Metzger and Qaffin (a Palestinian village in the northern West Bank). And I would think to myself: seriously, they don't have the slightest idea what's happening a meter from their back, like, it's amazing. You step one meter away and you're in a completely different reality, and people don't know about it. While doing patrols, there was this spot where we would stop and make coffee. Suddenly some guys from Metzger came to sit with us, and I said to myself: seriously, they have like no idea. They've been living here all their lives and they don't understand what's going on here at all. There's this reality here, which is sometimes, you know, kind of surreal. Where an 18-year-old boy checks, and de-facto controls the morning of 200 people, adults, children, old women, not so old women. And nobody knows this, people don't understand what's happening right next to them, in the territories. And people [soldiers] who are in the territories do things out of habit, it's their daily routine, it's what they do. And sometimes for soldiers, for me too, it took me some time before what was really problematic about my service hit me. At first I didn't think about all these stories I told you about the deputy battalion commander, and the platoon commander who beat someone, but really that's all nonsense, get it? What's really problematic [is that] you don't understand [what you're doing] because you're doing it as a soldier and not doing it as a thinking human being.

#### And what's problematic?

It's problematic that I, as a 19-20 year old kid, control the lives of so many people, and that I have disproportional authority. And honestly, I'll tell you the truth, I also have no idea what to do with it. I would check people without knowing why I'm doing it. And this whole situation where people are, every day, under this military rule, and their day-to-day lives are determined by it. That's what's problematic. That's it, at large. That's what bothers me in the conflict, that's what bothers me in the territories. As far as I'm concerned I don't care what they do, what solution there will be, whether we divide Jerusalem or divide Hadera, as long as we don't rule these people.

I remember that once we were talking when we got back to our rooms [at the post] and one [soldier] said that she slapped an Arab. It was the first time that I heard of a girl who really slapped an Arab.

#### What did you say to her?

It started quite the discussion in our company, among the girls, like, in the sense of how did you dare? She was at the post with someone who actually wasn't one of the more violent characters in our company, among the gentlest in the company. And I remember her saying: "Yes, he [the Palestinian] wasn't talking nicely to me," something like that, "he answered me nastily and stuff, and yes, I slapped him." And I'm thinking about this Arab, this adult, that some blonde girl comes and slaps him at the post. I don't know, it was just so shocking to even think about it. And after we had a discussion about it the girls said to her: how did you dare, I would never... And we had this sort of who did and who didn't. Barely ten seconds passed and two other girls already admitted that they had, this one slapped, and the other told some Arab to get down on his knees once, something like that. And one said that she once cocked her weapon in an Arab's face to, like, threaten him. He stood opposite her and said: "fine, what do you want now?" Something like that. She aimed the weapon toward his face and cocked the weapon. And I was in shock that these were my friends.

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"It's bad being the frightening one, the one they're afraid of. In general, seeing the people on the streets. Seeing an old woman crawl to me on all fours just to say: 'I know there's a curfew, that's why I'm not walking, but I have to go there, my kid is just here at the neighbor's, and I have to bring him home'"

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#### So how do you get used to it, when you find out that all the girls dealt out slaps?

What do you mean dealt out slaps? Dude, she cocked a weapon to his face. Though it was quite common. The guys would do it a lot when they were threatening kids, adults, everyone.

#### Did you ever see someone cock a weapon?

Sure, it's a common thing. Like: where are you going? 'Chik-chik' (sound of cocking a weapon). You don't shoot, but the chik-chik was...

#### Cocking and aiming?

Sure, that was the most, the most basic threat there was. I mean, someone is walking outside: where are you going? Chik-chik. Like sort of: where are you going? Chik-chik. At children. At everyone.

#### One thing that you take with you from your time there.

One thing? I don't know, I don't have one thing. It's shitty to live in fear. That was the most... I really saw that. I saw people who were afraid.

#### Of you?

Of me? Yes, a bit as well. Of me, too. When I call someone over, just to call someone over, like, "come", because you know, you have to check, because you do have to check who the people are passing there in the street, yes, there are all sorts of incidents there, all sorts of stuff. So even when I called up someone to talk to them, to check their ID, just in order to prevent friction, because I see some shitty Jew approaching. Only to move him [the Palestinian] out of his way. Come here, stand here next to me, sort of pointing to where he should stand. Really just because I see this nasty person who's now walking down that path, and I really have to move this Arab from his path. And you see the Arab go: "yes, yes, what, what, no, I don't have anything, what." Like, in fear. Why would a soldier call you aside if he isn't going to be a piece of shit? If he doesn't think you've done something wrong? I think it was really their way of thinking, too. Why would they call me over if I didn't do something wrong? They would immediately say: "nothing, nothing, I didn't do anything."

Or there were those who didn't speak Hebrew, and all the other soldiers would lash out at me, like, "Do you really believe that he doesn't know Hebrew? Everyone here knows Hebrew, they can teach you and me both." And I, every time someone didn't know Hebrew, I would try to communicate with them like this or like that, until everyone was really on my case all the time, like, "What did you think, that there's someone here who doesn't know Hebrew? They all know Hebrew." And the sad thing is that it really turned out that they all knew Hebrew. Every person to whom I tried to somehow explain something, when [another] soldier would come over and concretely threaten him somehow, stand close to him or whatever, or cock his weapon at him or something like that – suddenly they spoke amazing Hebrew. And that is, you know, it's all defense mechanisms, it's obvious. Why would he hide the fact that he knows Hebrew unless he wanted to give fewer answers and leave as quickly as possible? It's bad being the frightening one, the one they're afraid of. In general, seeing the people on the streets. Seeing an old woman crawl to me on all fours just to say: "I know there's a curfew, that's why I'm not walking, but I have to go there, my kid is just here at the neighbor's, and I have to bring him home." And she comes back with a baby. She says to me: "Should I crawl on my knees?" I say to her: of course not, get up, go. A second later a soldier cocks his weapon at her just because she's passing by his post, and she gets back on her knees so he won't... "I'm just getting my baby, I'm just..." Like that. I say: why should she have to explain anything to me at all? She's walking in her neighborhood. It's her neighborhood, and she has to explain to me that she's just going to bring her baby. That's bad.

#### Did you also feel bad at the time?

I felt bad, sure. In these situations, when suddenly a woman crawls on her knees, when a father suddenly gets slapped, when suddenly they want to piss off the son, so they slap his father.

## 4

Lieutenant • Nahal, 932<sup>nd</sup> Battalion • 2015

“The settlement in Hebron is an island in a huge Palestinian city. I mean, you have to use so much force to maintain the order there, that even if you bring 200 Buddhist monks, they would have to use violence to maintain order and prevent riots on a daily basis”

You never need a court order when you search a Palestinian's home. You just have to want to do it and then you do it. It's not like when you're an Israeli civilian and a policeman wants to enter your home, he either needs a well-founded suspicion that you're committing a crime, or for someone to be in danger, or a court order stating that he has the authority to search and find evidence. In Hebron, if you're a Palestinian, I'll enter your house whenever I feel like it, and search for whatever I want and I'll turn your house upside down if I want to. The same applies, for that matter, to a foot patrol that just wants to rest on someone's roof and scout the area. Or, say, every time vehicles are stopped at Abu-Sneina, which is the neighborhood adjacent to the Jewish neighborhood there, so you always put a soldier or two on the roof to scout and see who's arriving from far off, who's throwing stones, where from, and stuff like that. You simply open up their home, tell them 'get out of the way, we're going up to your roof to scout.' You already know that they'll shout and object, [and] you know that it doesn't matter, because you're going to go up to the roof.

#### What do you do when they start to shout and object?

You shout louder and they get it. I mean, they're not dumb, most of them. They know you'll arrest them or you'll hit them, and in the end you'll get on the roof. They won't stop you from going up to the roof.

#### They understand who has the power.

Yes. Listen, that's the craziest thing about Hebron. When you leave, everything just continues. It's not that it's a few months and then it ends, it's really people's lives. As we speak, right now – if anyone were to hear this in the future – it is still happening. I hope it won't happen in the future. These things that I'm telling, they're happening right now. Right now there's a soldier on a roof who argued with the owner of the house, and eventually got on the roof. Many times it's, say, a woman who stayed at home, a housewife, and she's scared to death because of the soldiers entering without her having anyone with her, and they go up to the roof through the house anyway. Wow, I actually never thought about how frightening it must be for these housewives. So in short, you simply enter the house and they have no... There isn't even any discussion about, like, rights. To have rights, you need a system that enforces law and order, and over there nobody even acknowledges them. The things that we completely take for granted. Like, any person would demand some kind of basic respect from a policeman. The privilege of being innocent until proven guilty – this isn't even part of the lexicon there. Not even close. It's light years away from the discourse there on... Really, like I said, whoever commands that mission at the moment is the village sheriff. He'll do as he pleases.

## >>> Why I Broke The Silence?

**You are undoubtedly an example of a soldier who thinks, who understands what he's doing. During the arrests you carried out, for example, when you would turn people's homes upside down, what did you feel?**

I kept myself in the state of mind of a mission. That is to say, I have a mission, there could be weapons here, and I'm like going to prevent the killing of Jews. That's what carried me through. The arrests of drug [dealers] – you simply do it because, what, now you'll go to jail for refusing an order when you're told to arrest some drug dealer? And I also had a very clear responsibility, that I'm not saving the world now, I'm leading my platoon, and I also want to build a good platoon, a platoon with accomplishments, so that they'll also feel that they're doing something during this draining service in Hebron. So every mission beyond patrolling or guarding – you immediately jump on it. You want to carry out arrests, you want to get those missions also in order to show your guys that you get things [to do], and that you're trusted. So anything like that you say: fine, I'll do the drug arrests to practice for arresting terrorists or what they call hostile terrorist activity.

**But what do you say to yourself after turning someone's home upside down?**

I remember that guys came to me, asked to talk to an officer from the post. I went out to talk to them, we had this talk at Tel Rumeida, with the whole view there, and there were all sorts of questions about violence toward Palestinians, and it was actually the more right-wing guys who asked about all sorts of things... I told them at the time, listen, I'm not going to tell you my opinion about Hebron, but as an IDF officer I must carry out certain orders to preserve stateliness. As if stateliness was the loftiest value for me. It's very 'Ben Gurionish,' like, you need statism, and you need unity of command, and at some point the leadership will come to its senses and... but I'll do my part and whatever is needed. And I told them: listen, there's violence here,

it's not as if there isn't violence. Like, this system needs violence, that's its basis.

#### What system?

The system of repressing the population there. Otherwise it wouldn't work, because the settlement in Hebron is an island in a huge Palestinian city. I mean, you have to use so much force to maintain the order there, that even if you bring 200 Buddhist monks, they would have to use violence to maintain order and prevent riots on a daily basis. So I told them: listen, if I won't be here, Jews will be murdered, and I don't want Jews to be murdered, so I'm here, and I, like, do it. And even the violence there, I told them, like: 'What should I break the silence about? Some slapping around? About beatings I saw? About stuff like that?' Like, I mean, I thought it was so obvious. They always say, 'So why didn't you report these things to the Military Police Criminal Investigation Division?' Well, you don't call the transport ministry when traffic lights are working as they should. And that's the feeling, that violence is just a traffic light working as it should, and that's the system and you do what you have to do and...

**What you're saying is that these 'slaps' are part of how the system works?**

Yes, exactly. That's like the norm. It's shitty. It's all sorts of self-deception that keeps you going. It's ridiculous to put on 18-year-old kids the responsibility for what the guys in ties are doing in the Knesset and government ministries. At least, that's my opinion. That's what kept me together during my service in the territories. Later on, when I was released and I suddenly digested all I went through, only then did I understand how... I don't even know what to say about it. How it's a stain that won't be removed from this flag that I was so enthusiastic about, of Zionism and stateliness and, like, the homeland.

#### That's a difficult moment.

Yes, it was very difficult. I had a few very difficult months. I can't continue to cooperate with this abusive treatment of the Palestinian population for some anachronistic fantasy of a Jewish kingdom in Judea and Samaria. Like, that's not what I'm going to do with my life.

5

Captain • Air Force • 2014

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&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

In [Operation] Protective Edge there were drizzle missions on the roof.

**By drizzling you mean Roof Knocking (procedure involving firing a small missile at a building to warn its inhabitants that it is about to be bombed)?**

Carry out Roof Knocking, then see to it that the building is evacuated and then take the building down. Personally, for me, it became very hard, first of all, the whole concept of taking buildings down and harming people, I saw innocent people, it seems completely useless to me. I really didn't understand why we were doing it, I just couldn't grasp why we were going and taking down buildings. I saw a crazy amount of shaking buildings on the screens. First they did Roof Knocking, and then the next stage was to take the building down, and you say [to yourself], some of the buildings were legitimate [targets], where there was ammunition and stuff, some were [the homes] of battalion commanders from Rafah [serving for Hamas], houses in which nobody even lives, whomever lived there was evacuated. And there were [cases] where they took down the building when everything around it was simply in ruins, and hundreds of people probably lived there.

**When you say that they took down a lot of buildings, can you estimate how many such buildings you encountered that were taken down?**

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"We see a tsunami in Thailand and we're all very saddened by what happens to all the civilians the day after. You know, they don't have a home. But we're carrying out a fucking tsunami 70 kilometers from Tel Aviv and we aren't even aware of it"

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[Within the unit] there were about a hundred and something, according to my estimation. I saw about 10 or 20.

**Why is such a house taken down? Say, that battalion commander's [home]. You say there wasn't anybody in the house, so why take down the house?**

Not just that, everyone is also evacuated with Roof Knocking and fliers and phones.

**So why nevertheless?**

Because according to IDF methodology, it's very intimidating when you knock someone's house down.

**Intimidating for whom?**

Intimidating. It's a deterrent force, now that the family has nowhere to live. You [as a Palestinian] say: everything I had in the house – is gone.

What shocked me, [was] that you would do things sitting behind a desk, in front of a computer, and you would cause colossal damage, collective and personal, to every single person there. Trauma for life, psychological problems, killing, of course. Everything comes from the political echelon, which you've stopped believing in. They do it in order to solve the problem of civilians being attacked in our country, trying to find some magical solution, saying: okay, my mantra is no deals, no talking to the enemy, no effort to mediate rifts. And we come with this approach of doing whatever it takes at the expense of hundreds and thousands of casualties, and tens of thousands wounded, so long as they stop the shelling, until the next time. I don't want the country and the army to take part in attacking civilians. The goal of the army is to protect us, and I couldn't find a strong connection to defense through harming such quantities of civilians. I also wanted people to see [my] testimony and say: yes, it's quite crazy, this loss of humanity. If for one moment you would think of what would have happened if you were in that building receiving a drizzle (Roof Knocking procedure involving firing a small missile at a building to warn its inhabitants that it is about to be bombed) in the middle of the night, and now you have [to gather] all your photo albums and all your belongings, and leave the house within ten minutes. I simply began

thinking like a Palestinian: what would happen if I wouldn't leave the house, would they raze the house? And if I scream, "Don't bomb," will anyone hear? What about the kids, the kids don't understand anything at all. All sorts of situations passed through my mind, when I see this "drizzle" and then the attack on TVs, on screens, through projectors, in drone photos, you simply can't grasp that there is massive pain and rage. I said, we see a tsunami in Thailand and we're all very saddened by what happens to all the civilians the day after. You know, they don't have a home. But we're carrying out a fucking tsunami 70 kilometers from Tel Aviv and we aren't even aware of it.

## 6

Sergeant • Givati Brigade • 2002 &lt;&lt;&lt;

&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

Maybe the only time I saw a Palestinian was when I saw the body of a terrorist in the dining hall, when everyone was like, "Come, come, there's a body of a terrorist."

**In the dining hall?**

Yes, there was nowhere else to put the bodies.

**What was the story?**

I think they set out on an ambush and succeeded in killing a terrorist. The dining hall is the only hall in the post, so it served all sorts of operational needs. All the tables were cleared, the body of the terrorist was laying there. Suddenly I recall a crazy story. When I arrived at Orev [an anti-tank unit], I suddenly came across all sorts of photos. People started passing around photos they took from an encounter with a terrorist who they completely tore to pieces, and then they photographed all his [body] parts scattered about there. It was quite a famous story, he [the terrorist] came up to the post, he came to attack the post, and almost succeeded in reaching the post. They killed him. It was a well-known success story in the IDF that the soldiers managed to kill this terrorist, they may have even received a citation for it. And then they photographed it and circulated in the following weeks – circulated the photos of this torn-up terrorist amongst themselves.

**And who showed them to you?**

They showed them to each other and I was there.

**And the state of mind was that this was booty?**

It was more like a fun thing, it's interesting. Let's make our lives more interesting.

**The officers didn't know about these photos?**

They may have known. I, too, didn't see anything wrong with it, it seemed fine to me. From my point of view a terrorist was a terrorist, not a person whose family was in the Nakba. Even in training, the [female] commanders are sort of men, they subjugate you, and they drive you

I think the blindness that women are led to, behaving in a military, aggressive manner, just like men, is appalling. Instead of women being the opposition, they encourage [that], or want to become men. It's appalling that we're a supportive force of sorts, for everything that happens. I think I bear indirect responsibility, too, as someone who's supposed to maintain it ideologically. What was my role, actually? To validate the fact that we're there, and beautify it. At later stages I suddenly understood that that's what I did, I was the propaganda minister. I maintained something in this mechanism in a more direct sense than, say, someone responsible for the trucks entering Gaza. I was a poster [girl] of sorts for 'here, we're really concerned with being a humane army.' Personally I don't think that the scar all this leaves you with is any less than the scarring a combatant is left with, because you realize that you cooperated with this mechanism and are a part of it. There are things that I don't remember, and I don't think that's incidental. They do it on purpose, you're supposed to forget what happened there.

to such a level that you become disciplined and accept everything. It doesn't matter that you're not doing [level] 07 combat training, you're in 07 subjugation. You're there to serve them by virtue of being a woman and by virtue of being on duty at headquarters. Whatever you think is extremely negligible.

## 7

First Sergeant • Nahal, 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion • 2014 <<<

&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

We had this night of [distributing] summons and arrests and such, some three summonses and an arrest – or more, I don't remember – when we passed through two villages. And then, when we arrived at the second village I tried to recall what happened half an hour ago, or an hour ago at the first village, and I, like, couldn't remember.

**What do you mean?**

I didn't remember whom I arrested, whom I summoned and it ate at me. How can I not remember? I just ruined four families' night, or week, or whatever, how can I not remember their faces? You really suppress it, you suppress the whole situation. You wear a mask of sorts, you're the toughest guy in the world. "Army, Geish (the word for 'army' in Arabic)," I would knock on the door, suddenly I was this tough character and it's not me at all.

**So how did it become you?**

I don't know, because that's what I felt was needed for it to succeed. So that we could get out of there quickly, and also the situation that I don't sleep much at night and sort of... You know, you finish at six in the morning, you're already up at eight, and then you're already awake until the next arrest, and then you leave at four in the morning and you're entirely lethargic. You end up half asleep, standing up in somebody's home with your weapon aimed, and then you don't even remember what happened, you're dying to get out of there so you do what needs to be done as quickly as possible. But you enter at three in the morning, [to the home of] a family's and... [a soldier] approaches a Palestinian and talks to him in broken Arabic, the interrogators don't really know Arabic. So how stupid does it sound when some soldier enters, starts threatening you in broken Arabic, but because he has the power, there's nothing you can do. He [the Palestinian] is completely inferior there, and you've got the upper hand.

**Why talk? Why break the silence? What's important to you that people know?**

First of all, they should know what's happening. Most people don't really know what it looks like there. And then, when you argue with people about the occupation, they say, "What, you're exaggerating, there's no such word as occupation at all, it's just a word that leftists made up. What occupation? Their lives are great." Yes, but like... You know, how can you say "great lives" when I speak about summoning? When every night there's a possibility that [the army] will enter your home? Every night my company ruined the nights of a few such families. How can you run your life like that? How can it not be an occupation when the army enters your home once a month?



Those times that they [the settlers in Hebron] come and talk to you and are nice to you and offer you food and drink and invite you over, that's when you feel the hypocrisy issue. On the one hand they offer you food and drink and show you how much they care about you and how grateful they are, but the moment you get in their way, they won't give a damn about you, and they'll push you, "Don't get in my way."

#### Did you encounter such cases?

Yes, near the Tomb [of the Patriarchs] there are many Arab stores that have been closed since the Intifada. Once they were open, and today they're not allowed to open them. And a group of adult settlers, 30, 40 or older, simply set up a plastic table with food and drink. They simply sat opposite an Arab store that was allowed to open, and waited there. At first I didn't understand what the story was there, they're sitting with a plastic table with food and drink, and they offered us food, and were really nice and talked to us. I didn't understand that they were having a demonstration in front of the store. The moment the Palestinian came and opened his store, they began to riot, began to attack. We tried to stop them and they pushed a Givati soldier to the ground. One of the soldiers tried to use his body to stop one of the settlers, whom we had been talking to about three minutes earlier, and we had a really good conversation, and it was nice, and we smiled and talked amicably, and suddenly he [the settler] had an aggressive expression: get out of here, don't get in my way.

#### What did they want?

They simply wanted to cause a commotion about the Palestinian being allowed to open his store there. There were also babies there, and pregnant settler women.

#### What did you do about it?

We tried to stop the riot. After that, the Givati platoon commander sort of quipped: they always do that, bring babies and pregnant women, to make it harder for us to deal with them so that we won't apply too much force.

They always use that filthy trick. That's what he said.

#### So how are you supposed to handle such an incident? You now see the settlers attacking the Palestinian storeowner – what are you supposed to do in such a situation?

Listen, when there's an officer [there] and a company commander as well, he naturally wants us to try and stop it, not to let it happen.

#### In this case how did you try to stop it?

We simply blocked them with our bodies, nothing more than that, because ultimately the soldiers are afraid because these settlers come to you all the time and say: I'll submit a complaint about you, you're not allowed to touch me. Stuff like that. And the army says so as well. You're told such things in briefings before heading out for patrols or guard duty. Usually the company commander wants you to try and prevent things like that but tells you: be careful, there are these limitations.

#### And how do you feel in such a situation?

You're mostly angry with them. I come and protect you and risk my life, I do hard work, dirty work, all in order to protect you, and there's this enormous crazy apparatus here with many resources just to protect a handful of people, and they do whatever they want. So you're irritated both by the level of hypocrisy and the fact that they don't give a damn about you.



"I went through a process in the army. I came from a place, thinking that we couldn't be doing anything wrong. Like, what, we're the state of Israel, we're doing something bad? It doesn't make sense. And then I arrived to the territories, and saw what's actually being done there"

I went through a process in the army. I came from a place, thinking that we couldn't be doing anything wrong. Like, what, we're the state of Israel, we're doing something bad? It doesn't make sense. And then I arrived to the territories, and saw what's actually being done there. I asked myself if what we're actually doing here is defending civilians, defending the state of Israel. And it didn't feel that way, it simply felt like there are settlers there, and we're defending them, [but] it feels like a completely different entity. They behave differently, they don't feel any belonging to the government and the law, they feel that they belong to this thing called greater Israel and stuff like that, and that's what interests them, and it simply feels wrong. You also see what happens in the territories as far as the Palestinians are concerned, what happens to them.

#### What happens to them?

I now have to leave my home in my neighborhood and pass through a crossing, wait for two hours knowing that I might not pass through. And really, if I have to get to work? I could get up in the morning and wait for two or three hours, and most likely can't get to work, and can't bring money home. When they enter my home in the middle of the night - and it's not a pleasant situation when someone enters your house in the middle of the night - and suddenly your kids start crying and they're scared, and everybody's scared, and

they simply turn your house upside down. Little by little you understand that something isn't right there. There isn't really something there that makes you feel that now you're protecting the state of Israel, the security of the state of Israel.

#### And how can talking about it help?

First of all it's the sort of thing that needs time, I think, [until] eventually people will really understand what's going on. It's simply a matter of raising awareness, I'm optimistic about it, I really believe that it will happen someday, that we'll get out of there. But it comes with the simple need to raise awareness, especially soldiers who will speak out about what they experienced there, even if it seems wrong to them, they should speak about these things. So that [people] will understand what's truly happening, and then as a society we can decide if what we're doing there is fine and acceptable for us, or if it's wrong and unacceptable for us. That's the issue.

9

Lieutenant • Artillery Corps • 2015

&lt;&lt;&lt; &gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

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“I was in such a situation that corrupted me to a degree which after some time Palestinians didn’t really have human faces. They were Arabs and as far as I was concerned, they lost all human form”

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Once a [female] dog handler joined us from Oketz (canine special forces) for an arrest in the village of Harmala, opposite Jewish Tekoa, opposite the settlement. We went into the house with the dog handler and I believe it [belonged to] a man of about 40, with a wife and three kids, six years old tops, I think. We began with the dog handler’s scan, it was the first time I worked with that kind of dog.

**What dog was it?**

A dog that looks for weaponry and explosives and such. Actually, the way the scan was carried out was that she leads the dog into the house, and really goes over every centimeter with him, and if he sits or something like that, it means that he identified something. So we went through the parents’ room at first, and then the living room thereafter, and then we reached the children’s room, a room that really reminded me of

my little brother’s room, with Lion King wallpaper and SpongeBob dolls, just like any other kid. We wanted to do a very thorough search and the dog handler, too, explained to us that if now the dog identifies something in some area, then our search there should be very, very meticulous, too. We reached the level of taking everything out of the closet and peeled off some of the wallpaper, removed some of the wall-to-wall carpeting from one area, we turned the bed upside down, everything there was left a complete mess, and when we took the father out, his wife was left behind alone in the ruins, in the completely messed-up home, with three little kids, sitting on the sofa, hugging them, and they’re all crying. It was a very powerful situation. In the end, by the way, we didn’t succeed in finding anything there; the only thing we found was a photo of Yahya Ayyash from Gaza.

**The engineer.**

The engineer, yes, we were pleased because we managed to prove a connection to Hamas.

**Just a photo of his hung on the wall?**

Yes, a small photo, in a sort of golden frame.

**And the room that reminded you of your brother’s, the one that was completely upside down when you finished with it, how did you feel that moment?**

I felt terrible about the room, but you become sort of

numb to the whole situation, I mean, it didn’t happen much that I would stop for a moment and really think now: hey, how would I feel if I were them, and that room reminds me of my kid brother’s room, because that’s probably something that happens subconsciously. It’s some sort of process in which Palestinians lose their humanity in certain situations, as far as I’m concerned. It really hurts me to say these things because I do see myself as a humane person and all, but I think that this situation and the place I was in there, [is] something that corrupts, really corrupts the soul.

A few weeks after arriving in Judea and Samaria, I believe, it was already clear to me that after being discharged I would break the silence, due to the moral conflict I experienced there. On the one hand, as a commander in the army, and yes, as someone who loves the State and believes in the legitimacy of the army. And on the other hand, all the things I carried out — let alone led — in Judea and Samaria, whether it was mappings, arrests, check posts, riots, etc. Things that I was opposed to morally, and that I have a feeling — especially when I think of my home or my family, or just in general — that most people have no idea what’s going on there, they don’t have a clue. I consider myself a person with worldviews that are a bit contrary and opposed to these things, but like, the very fact that I was in such a situation that corrupted me to a degree which after some time Palestinians didn’t really have human faces. They were Arabs, and as far as I was concerned, [they] lost all human form. I think that’s one of the main problems of the occupation, and I think that’s an excellent reason for those who took part in it to break the silence so that people will really know where they’re sending their children.

10

Major • Engineering Corps • 2008

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&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

**When you arrive at the area, you get instructions as to what you're supposed to do if a settler attacks a Palestinian, a herd of sheep, olive trees, stuff like that – what are you supposed to do?**

Nothing. The subject never came up. Nobody even thought of it as an option. At no stage does the army teach you how to handle a civilian population. That's not your role as a commander in the army, and the only thing that trains you for this is the field. Even the indecent procedure of detaining a Palestinian for two hours or 12 hours, or not detaining him at all, or slapping him while you're at it – it depends [on who you are]. Your political views, too, influence your decision making dramatically at any given time and place, because you're king. The commander on the ground is king, he determines everything, and he really has the power to decide who shall live and who shall die.

**And facing the settlers? When it happens with settlers, do you still have all those powers?**

No. The settlers are on our side, and the Palestinians are the enemy. It's very simple, who's a friend and who's a foe. So by definition, we know: this is an enemy, that's a friend, and therefore we will naturally handle a settler with kid gloves.

**There were cases of settlers attacking both soldiers**

**and officers. Are you authorized to arrest a settler, to detain?**

The unequivocal answer is no. There are no specifications. During training you learn how to handle riots, you learn how to handle an e-n-e-m-y. The legal definition of the army's role in the territories is to maintain order. The police's role in a normal country, for that matter.

**Did they [your commanders] talk to you about the term 'protected civilians'? Are you familiar with it?**

No, I'm not. I can say that I don't receive any clear, sensible, instructions as to how to handle the population and maintain daily order. And as a result, you find yourself in a situation of uncertainty, which is very problematic. At best, there's a commander who uses his, say, moral, lawful, whatever, discretion, and does the right thing. At worst, there's a commander who doesn't use his discretion, or it doesn't interest him, and does the wrong thing. But generally what happens is that we call the police. As far as I'm concerned, as the army on the ground, I don't want to deal with it at all. I don't want to deal with the situation. I wait for the police to arrive as quickly as possible. It's funny, we, those trusted to maintain order, wait for the professionals to come and do that.

Why break the silence? I was never silent. I tell these stories to whoever wants to hear.

**Why do you believe it's important that people know?**

We were on a Breaking the Silence tour, and then I thought about how all these stories – there is nothing dramatic about them. We didn't grab anyone and put a bullet through his head, we didn't beat anyone black and blue at a checkpoint, there wasn't... All these stories are very mundane. A few weeks ago there was an article in Haaretz, I forget whose, claiming that especially for those who come from a place of being human rights-minded, Breaking the Silence is a problematic organization. Why? Because when you hear of all the terrible cases, it's easier for you to say, "It isn't us, there are psychos, they need to pay". Even if you're a person who cherishes human rights, you say: I'm not shooting anyone, I don't eat Palestinians for lunch, and this isn't my army and this isn't the army I know, and that's why such incidents are exceptional incidents, and the exception indicates the norm, and the norm is that it's fine. [But] my wife told me that it's not true, that it's not the case, that there are actually tons of mundane stories. And then it really hit me [that] the huge mass is really a mundane mass and it's important to 'zoom in' on the banality, on the situation you're in, [on] all the stories that don't reach the news. Stories about what it means to be an occupier, not only what it does to

"It really hit me that the huge mass is really a mundane mass and it's important to 'zoom in' on the banality, on the situation you're in, on all the stories that don't reach the news. Stories about what it means to be an occupier, not only what it does to the Palestinians"

them [the Palestinians]. I don't want to be there, I feel shitty about it, and for me it's much easier to fight an enemy. Our presence there is horrible. When the enemy shoots, I shoot back. That's clear to me, there's no other way. But to sit there, to maintain this industry called the occupation and then not to deal with its consequences and wash your hands clean of it, and say 'they did this and they did that to us' – that doesn't work. And that's why I say that it's very important to shed light on the terrible banality of the occupation and what it does to us as a society, as human beings. There are people who might really be evil, or that's their ideological standpoint – that Arabs only understand force and that's how it has to work, and it can't be helped. But there are enough people who arrive there, and I really believe that people who have moral stances shouldn't hold themselves back from stating them. But still, you're worn out on every level, everyone is, you lose focus, you lose your humanity.

11

Lieutenant • Artillery Corps • 2002

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&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

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"I think that people really don't know. Maybe I'm naive. I think that even within the upper echelons of the army, or not the highest, they don't know what's happening. Because until you're on the ground, you don't know what's happening, and perhaps you also don't want to know what's happening"

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When we were at Atarot, the mess there was unreal. I was on patrol and there was this van parked at the edge of the airport. I went over to check it and saw holes that seemed – I don't know if it was from drilling or a bullet, or something like that, I got on [the radio] with the operations room to check it out. They told me to stay by the car. After about 20 minutes they told me, "Go, we'll get back to you with an answer." I drove and stopped some 100 or 150 meters away – today this area is called the Qalandiya checkpoint, at the time it was a few concrete barricades – and then they tell me, "Listen, go back to the car, he's wanted by the Shin Bet Security Service, get him." I start driving towards the vehicle, I see that it's driving away. I drive, it was like a movie, driving against the flow of traffic, we drove over a traffic

island and blocked him. I caught the guy, I threw him on the road. You put a weapon to his head. It ended up being a misidentification, they just typed the number wrong.

**It wasn't him.**

It wasn't him and it wasn't the vehicle.

**When do you find that out?**

Half an hour later.

**After you've already arrested him?**

Yes, sure.

**How did the Palestinian react?**

I don't know, I had my head [down]. I wanted to bury myself in the ground.

**Because you wasted your time, or because of the screw up?**

Neither. Because you suddenly realize what you're doing. You suddenly realize the 'jackboot-ness' (brutishness) of it all. I have no other way to describe it, you're a brute soldier, and you feel the leather boots, that's what you feel.

First of all, I look at what's happening here, within Israeli society. For a moment I focus less on Palestinian society, and say, there's something about the manner in which we express our evil. So really, it's evil in its most banal sense, that morally speaking, ethically, and certainly in terms of Jewish history, is forbidden for us. It turns our society into an aggressive one, and that, you know, really – forget all the politicians who are always former army people, and that's really their world-view – You see it on the road, you see it in the deceptive behavior, you see it in so many places, you see it in everything. You see it in the 'ugly Israeli,' and you say that sometimes you don't see it because it's already a part of you. And I think that we, as a society – that's our biggest disaster.

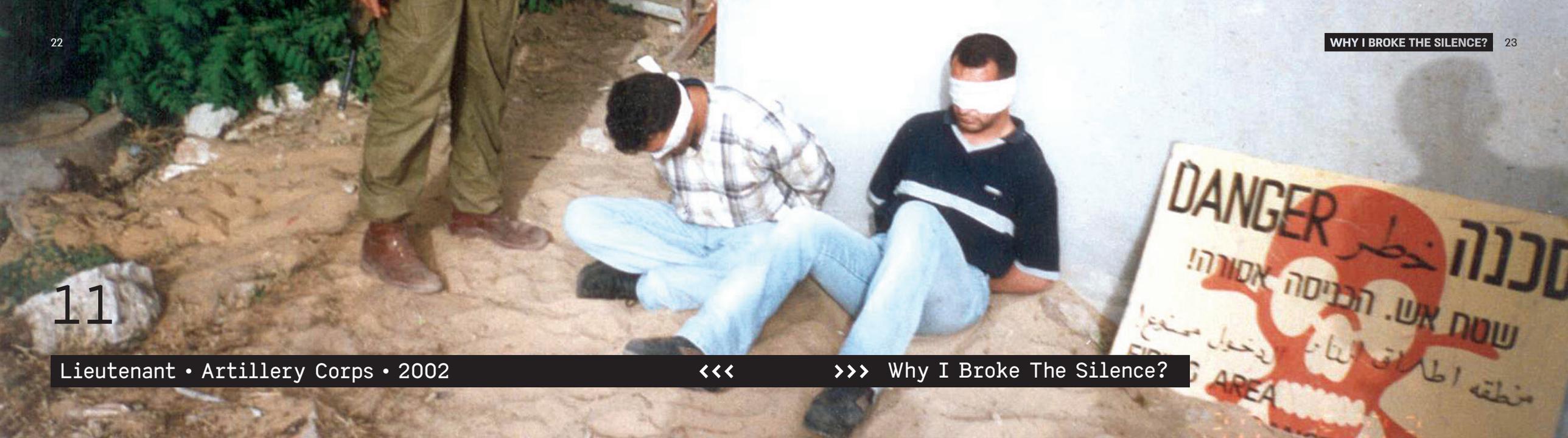
**And why break the silence?**

Because I think that people really don't know. Maybe I'm naive. I think that even within the upper echelons of the army, or not the highest, they don't know what's happening. Because until you're on the ground, you don't know what's happening, and perhaps you also don't want to know what's happening. If you were to ask people what goes on here, most people wouldn't know. I would get home, and people wouldn't understand. You don't want to tell people because they won't understand. We're talking about a kid, 19, 20 or 21 years old, who's bearing a burden, and he must have a much

stronger mentality, which is repressed in the army, in order to face it and say 'no.' So I don't want my children to do it, and I don't want them to grow up in such a society. And it doesn't make any difference whether we do stay in the territories or don't stay in the territories – I have my own opinion – but what's happening there now is turning us into a rotten society. I think that from an historical perspective, a Jew cannot be an occupier. Just like I think that the Israeli government can't deny the Armenian genocide.

**Even though there is a dissonance here, because we are [occupiers].**

That's exactly it, it's the victim who feels strong. It's like the kid who was abused and now he beats his kids.



## 12

First Sergeant • Nahal, 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion • 2015

Why I Broke The Silence?

I arrived on the scene of a riot and was told [by the officer]: Shoot rubber [bullets] at the so-called primary inciter, meaning the guy with the slingshot joking around the most, with everyone behind him.

**There's one of those at every demonstration?**

No, there are usually a few, and the rubber [bullets] are wasted on them.

**And what defines him as the primary inciter is that he's holding a slingshot?**

Right, but also socially. Socially, everybody's behind him, he's the man standing up front, walking.

**You can really see it?**

You know him, he'll also be the primary inciter during the next riot. In short, I remember the first time [the commander] told me to shoot rubber, and I was really nervous. Now that it happens on a daily basis, even me [with] some sort of values and moral background so to speak, at some stage the riots become a game, for both sides. Everybody knows that between 3 and 7 in the afternoon, we all go out to play, they throw stones and we shoot rubber. At a certain stage it was as simple as breathing, that's what I did, and it didn't bother me and I was indifferent to it, and I didn't care about hitting someone with rubber [bullets].

**What are the procedures for shooting rubber [bullets]?**

The procedures for using rubber are, shoot at the knee or lower, from a range of no less than 30 meters, I think. Procedures. But in real life...

**What happens in real life?**

In real life, at a certain stage I went through a process of dehumanization. I don't know, maybe when a stone hit near me, and a guy would curse at me or get on my nerves, then I would allow myself to raise the scope to the stomach area. If his back was to me then to his back. I knew I wasn't aiming at areas like the heart, because I knew the danger of that and I wasn't becoming a monster, but yes, I raised the scope a bit. And nobody ever measures your range, if I'm about 15 meters from a kid, and he's behind a car, and I'm, say, behind a tree, and he gets on my nerves – I'll shoot rubber at him, I won't count the meters. There are [also] deviations, it happens, it scatters (the bullets scatter upon shooting), and that's some sort of gray area that the soldiers allow themselves to be in. I, too, allowed myself to be in that gray area many times, like shooting above the knee.

**Did you shoot [rubber bullets] at someone from 15 meters?**

Yes.

**You're shooting with a Trij (Trijicon – sharpshooter scope)?**

Yes, I'm shooting with a Trij.

**The rubber bullets come in parcels, a sort of tampon (military slang for a nylon package containing three rubber-coated metal bullets, to be shot together).****Were there cases in which you disassembled it?**

I can't distinctly remember doing that. I remember that there was this thing that some guys would do it before riots. But I really don't distinctly remember whether I did it or not.

**Did you know that it wasn't allowed?**

Yes, of course, we knew it wasn't allowed, we knew that it increases the pain and the range, and that was the issue. There were guys who would do it, and guys who said: no, don't do it.

**Do you have any idea whether the commanders knew?**

To assume that the commanders don't know about things seems baseless to me. But many commanders know and keep quiet because they're in favor. Commanders keep quiet about things that soldiers do.

**When you say commanders, what do you mean, squad commanders?**

Squad commanders, platoon commanders, battalion commanders. When it suits them they keep quiet, [like] the three monkeys.

"After the army I took part in all sorts of forums that talked about it, and I felt that there were many people who talked about the occupation without understanding. There's also the mentality of an army maintaining an occupation, of the soldiers, which isn't disconnected from the mentality and codes people take with them to the State, thereafter, to their work, to all of Israeli society"

I think it began last year, during one of the media storms surrounding Breaking the Silence. I didn't really get into it until a friend of mine told me he was going to give a testimony. I asked him why and we got to talking about Breaking the Silence. I was familiar with some of the organization's work, but never even tried thinking about it. When we began talking about it, I simply understood that the army can't self-inspect, definitely not when it comes to the occupation, so the democratic principles and bounds on which democracy is founded, can become gray areas. And in addition to that there's the occupation itself, which is the most anti-democratic thing happening. And the discourse – after the army I took part in all sorts of forums that talked about it, and I felt that there were many people who talked about the occupation without understanding. There's also the mentality of an army maintaining an occupation, of the soldiers, which isn't disconnected from the mentality and codes people take with them to the State, thereafter, to their work, to all of Israeli society that isn't the army. And there's an entire nation under occupation, and we must understand what's happening. There are many people who don't know what it looks like.

First Sergeant • Nahal, 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion • 2010 <<<

>>> Why I Broke The Silence?

The goal in mapping is actually to take some sort of location, some house, and map it from within: How many rooms, which room overlooks what... All the technical details of the house, where the final goal is to create a better understanding of how the Palestinian part of the city looks within the homes, with the aim being that if later there's a need for a Straw Widow (turning a Palestinian home into an army post), or stuff like that, we'll have the option to do it. I always wondered, like, how much of this material was passed on and how much wasn't, I don't really know what happened with this material, and I know we did quite a bit of mapping. It happens quite a lot.

#### When would you do it, throughout the day?

No, it was almost always at night. Hebron is a densely populated city, and operating during the day is problematic.

#### And how did it feel to be in these houses during the mappings?

It felt disgusting because you're aware that the situation... If during some arrest you can convince yourself that there's added value in what you're doing, and that most of the day you're doing stupid guard duty, but now you're really arresting someone who harms people – which also doesn't make the situation easier when you see the children as you enter the house – but during mappings you feel like you're totally hassling innocent people. I'm sure you can find tons of operational justifications, but the feeling on the ground, at least mine – [and] I believe for any slightly sane soldier [too] – was that it's tiring, it's unpleasant, and it's not something you'd wish upon anyone. You don't wish it upon yourself, too... But I think that during the remainder of our service it was something we ended up doing a whole lot.

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"We all are rank and file soldiers, we all experienced it, we all did it, we're all coping with it to this day. Some of us take it harder, and some less, but it's something you sent us to do, so if we continue doing it, come on and answer to that, because you sent us and are continuing to send us there"

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#### Why did you want to share your experiences with us, to break the silence?

First of all, I feel I was never silent, like, this just seemed to be a way to turn up the volume perhaps. I always talked about it with people. I don't know how much I was willing to get down to the details, I don't wait for people who aren't closely familiar with the experience, to comfort themselves by saying that it was something special, or that I'm mentally wounded

or something. I'm not shell shocked and I didn't have nightmares at night, but I always talk about it, and it's always something that I don't hide from anyone, including guys who are about to enlist, and I will tell them to go and enlist. Because as far as I'm concerned this garbage is on our lawn, and the solution isn't to move it to the neighbor's lawn. When I say garbage, I'm referring to the situation, not the people, God forbid. That's it, I saw a really good opportunity to add a voice. I'm a big believer in Breaking the Silence's goal, which is, as I see it at least, a goal that has a, like... It's precise. To come and show – not even to say – that a moral occupation isn't possible. But instead of saying that, simply coming and showing: here, we all are rank and file soldiers, we all experienced it, we all did it, we're all coping with it to this day. Some of us take it harder, and some less, but it's something you sent us to do, so if we continue doing it, come on and answer to that, because you sent us and are continuing to send us there. Whether it's for reserve duty, or our little brothers. And don't ignore it, because in ignoring it – it's amazing how fast you get into civilian life, and get into your job, and you work in education, and it can seem to go away. I'm a political person who takes an interest, reads and watches the news, and can easily not know what's happening in Hebron for two years, without the faintest idea. It's not... If my friends hadn't been

serving there, I wouldn't have heard anything about it. So I'm saying that if it's so well concealed from my eyes, as a person who's involved in it, I can only guess how easy it is for people to repress it into nonexistent corners. I think that another necessary thing is for people to understand the effects it has on the society in which we live. That it might be a bit more severe. People should be a bit more open, but a violent society doesn't come from nowhere. A nation that occupies another nation will be violent. An act of occupation is a violent act. For three years I was taught – let's say a year and a half, one year of which I was in my Mission Chapter (the second year of military service within the Nahal Brigade, devoted to civilian educational work) – a violent, aggressive education, [I was taught] that I'm stronger, I'm holding the weapon. And I'm the law in a sense. I enlisted at an older age, but being the law at age 20 is difficult, and it easily becomes something corrupting. That's it, and I think that as many people as possible should know about it. I don't think it's very helpful for those who have experienced these things. I think it's an eye-opener and very useful for people who didn't experience it and don't really know. And also for those folks who think they know, but look on from the side and feel really sorry – so for once for them to understand that there's nothing to pity, there's... There's a way to deal with it. That's it.

## 14

First Sergeant • Nahal, 932<sup>nd</sup> Battalion • 2014

&gt;&gt;&gt; Why I Broke The Silence?

We carried out an arrest in Jelazoun. It was a very big arrest. We were with the police. The goal was to take in a guy, who if I'm not mistaken, sold Molotov cocktails, prepared Molotov cocktails. He was defined as dangerous. Jelazoun is a refugee camp and the alleys are all very narrow, sewage in the streets. We're headed to the arrest on foot and there's a big dumpster in the street full of trash, and suddenly a little boy and girl emerge from the dumpster. The boy, who was older than his sister, wasn't over six years old. Filthy, searching through all sorts of canned food. We arrive at the [site of the] arrest and the company commander's front command squad enters the house. We enter the house. A few mattresses, a very very poor house, and the mother opens the door for us. The company commander pushes the door with her, we enter the house, check the rooms. The company commander finds the kid, he's in bed. The moment he sees us he gets up, tries to escape through the window, and is caught. Within a few seconds, zip ties, he's handcuffed, blindfolded while still in the house, in front of his mother, and is about to be led out. His mother, by the most natural instinct, jumped at the company commander and tried to scratch him. We caught her by the armpit, and forced her back. He [the detainee] was a young guy, 20 something. We take him out, all his brothers wake up, the whole block

wakes up, people looking out through the windows. His father isn't at home. As we're stepping outside, the company commander tells me to guard him, that they're going back in to take his computer, to take all sorts of evidence and search his room. While we're outside, his mother is standing in the entrance to the house, hitting herself, crying, crying, crying, and then she runs up to me, kneels down, hugs my leg and mumbles in Hebrew-Arabic "please, please," all sorts of words. I don't know what she said in Arabic. She pleaded. Her son is blindfolded, standing, I'm holding him, [he] hears her. And I didn't do anything. I stood there like this and ignored her. I completely froze. You arrive there and you say, "I'm going to arrest the bad guys." Suddenly you see the eyes of a mother who [could be] your mother, your friend's mother, your grandmother's mother – crying. She's not a bad person. Maybe she doesn't like me, but from that moment on I understood why she doesn't like me. You won't see an Arab woman on the ground hugging a man's leg. It was very brutal. She didn't let me budge. I looked at her and my soldiers took him aside, and I sort of did this with my leg. I didn't say anything.

**What do you feel upon your release?**

The main feeling I left there with was that I really felt I understood. Somehow I understood them. I said to myself, I would also...

**The Palestinians?**

Yes. I would also come out and throw stones if they were to come take my big brother away in the middle of the night, no doubt about it, no matter what he did. Because he's my brother. And when you and your little sister go looking for food in garbage cans in the middle of night, how far can you get ahead in life? If you have cat carcasses and sewage flowing outside your house? So obviously at the age of 15 you'll go out and throw stones because that's where you vent your... You're educated that they're to blame. So suddenly [I have] a lot of understanding for the other side, something I didn't have at all prior. And I also really see a difference between those who were there and those who weren't – and it doesn't matter whether they're leftists or rightists – in terms of how they see the situation. Simply, whoever was there understands that there's another side to this matter, and they're not masked, they're human beings. When you block traffic, put up a checkpoint in the evening, setting up a checkpoint as you see families on their way home, and just because someone in their village threw a Molotov cocktail a few

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days ago, they suffer from it now. It doesn't mean that they did it, doesn't mean that they intend to do it, but they're now suffering from it.

## 15

## First Sergeant • Engineering Corps • 2002



## Why I Broke The Silence?

I remember we were alerted during Friday night dinner. Fifteen minutes had passed since a “gift” was placed on the road, I don’t know what [it was], they usually really did leave gifts by the way – not explosives – just stuff to see how we would react. Once they were seen [doing it]. Friday night, you’re walking unprotected in the backyards, if there was someone with a gun there he would have nailed us long ago. You start entering houses arbitrarily and there’s nothing you can say.

**You were looking for the guy?**

Yes.

**Did you know what he looked like?**

No.

**So what were you looking for?**

I don’t know. I remember that back then I suppressed it as an anthropological journey, we’ll see the homes from within. It was a Friday night, it’s their day off too, all the families are at home. Everyone’s watching TV with their satellite. You show up in the middle of their lives, out of nowhere, enter their house and see their bedroom.

**You didn’t mind it being an intrusion of privacy?**

I minded more going home for the weekend. To do my work and get back to the routine. It drove some of our guys crazy. For example, there was this ‘gung ho’ [soldier] who was always at home when something happened, so once during [a mission of] demonstrating our presence he entered a grocery store. I don’t know what the story was, but he went nuts, he overturned a shelf and spit in the face of the old shopkeeper. That was a week or two before his discharge leave. He was so pissed off.

**How did the old man react?**

He was silent. It was a chilling moment and I remember standing there and for half a minute you don’t know what to do. You know that the [Palestinian] person isn’t related, you’re in his shop and someone simply freaks out from stress, fearing the end of his service or

whatever it was. He wasn’t even speaking coherently, but rather screaming, he overturned the shelf and spit in the [old man’s] face. And I remember that after that I went to the company commander and told him, and said that the guy shouldn’t go on any security patrol jeeps, his leave should be extended. And this person, after he flipped out, did two more weeks, until the end, of security patrol jeeps.

**The company commander didn’t listen.**

No.

**What did the company commander say?**

“I’ll talk to him.”

**Do you know about other freak outs?**

No, he was a good soldier, that’s the thing. That was when I understood that after the army it would hit me – everything you absorb in the territories.

**When did you understand it?**

At the spitting incident. I understood that it eats at your soul and that these are things that shouldn’t happen, that an 18-year-old shouldn’t be at a checkpoint. And the fact that they didn’t do anything to him... If it would have happened at a checkpoint and people would have seen – he would have been punished. It was simply a case that could be closed nicely, for a person who served well and would be discharged in two weeks. They could just as well have decided not to. And he could’ve gone to jail and it would be justified and I would’ve testified against him.

**So what do you think happened to him?**

You’re in an insane situation and at some point it will get to you. Like people who flip out [while traveling] in India. It’s not the drugs, it’s being alone with your thoughts. I found myself after the army sitting and thinking. Also during the service you think, but you can’t think clearly. And you understand that these things sit with you, and what we’re doing here, for example, is to unload, to release a bit. The madness that happens

around you... Why am I saying that everything’s unclear and unstable? Because it’s all a crazy situation and it penetrates you bit by bit. It drives you nuts.

**How long will it take me to go nuts at a checkpoint?**

It depends. Do you have a girlfriend?

Yes.

Does she cry to you on the phone?

She’ll cry.

And is it hot that day or cold that day? Unpleasant weather? There’s a better chance of you going nuts.

**How long does it take for someone to go nuts? Two months, a year?**

It depends. There’s a spectrum. Younger soldiers do base security guard duty and those who’ve served longer get better posts, and those in the middle do checkpoints. If you’re in the middle doing checkpoints regularly – you go nuts. I know guys who requested to do guard duty instead of checkpoints. You go crazy. Say, for a week you think, you analyze your life, you write letters. Within a week you’ve exhausted what you have inside to entertain yourself in states of boredom. A week later you do your job grumpily, and the third week you’ll go nuts, and that’s in a normal state. Even if the food is good, which is also important, if you’re horny, tired, hungry or cold – you’ll go crazy much quicker. And if your status in the company isn’t great – then you’ll really take it out at the checkpoint. If you’re getting it from one side, [then] you’ll take it out on the other. For example, if the company sergeant major gives us the run-around because we’re newbies – you take it out. As a checkpoint newbie, you take it all out.

**What do you take with you from the army?**

Tons, revulsion from fresh bread for example... I don’t know. A lot of bad, and good, too.

**When did you start digesting everything?**

Also a bit during the army.

**At the end?**

Yes.

**The spitting incident? Was that the turning point?**

No. Even a bit before that, because we came for deployment in the territories and allegedly..

**When do you understand that the excuses have run out?**

It’s a complicated matter. Most of my friends were ‘jobniks’ (military slang for non-combatants) and when you come home and tell the stories, you begin to understand. You sit down for a beer with your friends and you tell them and all the while it doesn’t make sense. It’s something that you know is wrong, but you brush the thought away until the second you’re on your own, and I think that in many cases, at least in my case, it happened abroad. To sit down and think about it. I remember traveling in the US and I ended up working in some “Israeli job,” and living in an apartment with Israelis, and we began arguing about politics. One guy who didn’t serve in the army, another who was a jobnik in the Air Force, and I thought, “Fuck, you don’t have the slightest idea.” For a person who wasn’t there it sounds like two camps, large armies fighting one other. But when you see it in practice you see there’s no black and white, there’s gray. I remember going nuts, I was out of cigarettes, November in Minnesota, minus 20, a fifteen-minute walk to buy cigarettes through crazy winds. I was thinking about all this shit and suddenly it began to dawn on me, and I felt this wrongness inside,




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"I remember that every time they would say to me, "What do you take from the army and what did it do to you," I would say that after all I've seen, I think it gave me the directive to be a better person"

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and I arrived at the supermarket completely frozen, my ears blue and my nose blue and I bought the cigarettes, and on the line someone sees me and tells me he'll give me a ride home, a kindhearted American. He had a blue Cadillac, I always dreamed of riding in one. I started talking to him and I realized he wasn't a typical American, because a typical American doesn't leave the continent. It turned out he was in Vietnam for many years, he had a job in the army. And I told him that I just came from that discussion about Israel, and he said, "Only when you get out of there, do you understand how distorted it was and how bad it was for you. Always remember that thanks to that you can be a better person." Those were exactly the words I needed to hear at that moment. I remember that every time they would say to me, "What do you take from the army and what did it do to you," I would say that after all I've seen, I think it gave me the directive to be a better person.

#### **Today, do you carry a weapon?**

No. I worked for a year until I did reserve duty that brought it all back, and it was also the evening of the Passover Seder, reserve duty at a paramedic center, without the regular guys from the post.

#### **That was a year later?**

Yes. You do guard duty at the post, and since you're temporarily appointed, you get crappy shifts and you

begin doing six-six (six hours of guard duty, six hours of rest or other activities), and with the guard tower and the memories it came back. That was the breaking point.

#### **Just from the memories?**

From the implications. Bad memories can be taken in any direction, but – and that's when I decided that I'm done with this game, and I come from a family of four combatants and there are arguments, "Go in order to be the moral [soldier] there" – but I don't think it's possible to be moral with the erosion and these circumstances. Or it's beyond me. But even then, after that reserve duty, I returned to the routine and within two days you're back to work and nobody asks you how your reserve duty was. Only in the US, that wound reopened. The reserves flooded everything, I put it aside and said: one day I'll deal with it. After the conversation with that person, that American from Vietnam, I then realized I need to talk about it and mention it. To this day you get into political arguments and you hear about all sorts of incidents, and honestly, I think that whoever was there has the duty to tell, to talk, to remark.