

Three Women Writers, One War

New Israeli Refusenik Literature

Joel Schalit

- *Breaking Ranks: Refusing to Serve in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip* by Ronit Chacham. Other Press, 2003.
- *Reporting from Ramallah* by Amira Hass. Semiotexte, 2003.
- *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948* by Tanya Reinhardt. Seven Stories Press, 2002.

It's not that there aren't sadistic commanders, there certainly are, but that's not where the problem is. The problem is the good-hearted leftist commander. The one who doesn't beat people and doesn't curse, but does only what he is told. The one who is ordered "uproot that orchard today," and does just that.

So writes thirty-year-old Staff Sergeant [Res.] Ishay Rosen-Zvi in Ronit Chacham's *Breaking Ranks: Refusing to Serve in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip*. An observant Jew and a doctoral student in intellectual history at Tel Aviv University, Rosen-Zvi's concerns are shared by the majority of the nine Israeli "refuseniks" who contribute to and are interviewed by Chacham in one of the most unorthodox and compelling collections of Israeli writing to come out of the al-Aksa Intifada.

Appearing on the heels of an intensely productive year for English translations of left-wing Israeli literature, *Breaking Ranks* does more than document the reasons given by refuseniks for refusing service in the

Occupied Territories. It also breaks rank, so to speak, with the translation monopoly exercised by the elite Israeli progressive intellectuals associated with the liberal/left daily *Ha'aretz*, such as Amira Hass and Aluf Benn, and academics identified with the New Historians movement, such as Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim.

The new (for lack of a better term) "refusenik" literature being translated into English is largely dominated by Ashkenazi intellectuals with either academic or journalistic pedigrees, strong English publication records in *Ha'aretz*, and, to a lesser extent, *Le Monde Diplomatique*. This genre of literature had its symbolic inauguration with the September 2002 release of *The Other Israel: Voices of Refusal and Dissent* (New Press), edited by Roane Carey and Jonathan Shainin. As Joe Lockard noted in his review in *Bad Subjects* (2002), there was a conspicuous absence of Mizrahi, Israeli Arab, and Haredi voices in the collection.

While never fully making up for such typically Israeli left-wing deficits, *Breaking Ranks* certainly goes a long way towards doing so in its focus on the voices of ordinary soldiers, all of whom arrived at their conclusions about the injustice of the Occupation



through their experiences in the Israel Defense Forces. Keenly aware of the ethnic and class makeup of the Israeli Left, Chacham almost goes too far out of her way to point out such problems in the introductions to each reservist's chapter she is careful to include at least one Mizrahi Jew, Tal Belo, and one holdover from *The Other Israel*, Shamai Leibowitz—the son of the late, albeit early, critic of the Occupation, Rabbi Yeshayahu Leibowitz—in the volume.

What characterizes each soldier's contribution to *Breaking Ranks* is an explication of how their tours of duty forced them to their moral limits: that at a certain point, rather than becoming desensitized by killing children and destroying private homes, they could not stomach the violence anymore, and began actively refusing to perform their reserve service in the Occupied Territories. What is equally inspiring is how these reservists' testimonies speak

Joel Schalit is the editor of *The Anti-Capitalism Reader* and the author of *Jerusalem Calling: A Homeless Conscience in a Post-Everything World*, both of which are available from Akashic Books. His *Israel vs. Utopia* is forthcoming from Akashic.

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to a future moral exhaustion for Israel. As a microcosm of Israeli society and as battle-hardened soldiers, one wonders whether the settlers will eventually have equivalent scabs removed from their eyes and decide to leave, for the same reasons Chacham's reservists have decided to stop defending them.

It would be nice to think that, from a progressive Jewish perspective, one could ascribe an old-fashioned Zionist heroism to these soldiers' decisions—here being examples of the peace-loving Israeli warrior only wishing to take up arms when it is truly necessary. However, none of these reservists ascribes any purity to their actions. To varying degrees, nearly all of them implicate themselves in violence—if not war crimes—against civilians. Nevertheless, it is because of these experiences—specifically the intimacy created by their brutal interactions with Palestinian civilians—that these individuals undergo a process of moral awakening to the dark side of Israeli history, to war, and to the injustice of the Occupation.

Why it took military service in the territories to move these troops to such conclusions, however, is another story. One would think that after the seventeen-year occupation of Lebanon, in addition to the experience of the first Intifada, most Israelis would have known better. Addressing this lack of perspective is the *raison d'être* for journalists like Amira Hass, whose most recent anthology of writings from *Ha'aretz*, *Reporting from Ramallah*, provides a political reading of the Occupation through her first-hand presentations of its effects in a daily newspaper format. Stunningly clear, concise, and unabashedly moralistic, one cannot walk away from any of Hass' writings on the subject without having learned what it really feels like to live under Israeli military rule.

For those who have followed Hass' work on *Ha'aretz*' English-language website these past few years, none of the writings contained in *Reporting From Ramallah* will read like her

previous book, the groundbreaking *Drinking The Sea at Gaza* (Owl Books, 1999). But for first-time readers, this is the best introduction to Hass one can find. An extremely well chosen selection of articles published in *Ha'aretz* between 1997 and 2002, *Reporting From Ramallah* charts the breakdown of the peace process, moving from the

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last two years of Netanyahu's government all the way through the first two years of the Al-Aksa Intifada.

While arranged chronologically, there is no grand sequence that unites the book's narrative—simply the push and pull of everyday life for Palestinians living in the territories under Israeli and PA rule which, given Hass' clear eye for the bigger picture, is inevitably brushed by the weight of diplomatic and military decisions made in Jerusalem, Washington, and Europe. However, this is not to the exclusion of Hass' detailing of the particularities of Israeli military sadism. Hass describes countless scenes of the cruelties inflicted by roadblocks: women unable to get to hospitals to deliver their babies, men unable to travel to work, and verbal and physical harassment.

Perhaps the most memorable

documentation of IDF policy is Hass' November 20, 2000 interview with an IDF sharpshooter. Published a month after the onset of the Al-Aksa Intifada, when sharpshooters were being employed to attack Palestinian protestors around the Temple Mount and the police used snipers to kill 13 Israeli Arab demonstrators near Umm Al Fahmm, Hass' interview is chilling for what it reveals about IDF definitions of what constitutes a legitimately "adult" target:

Q: You haven't shot children.

A: None of the snipers have shot children.

Q: But nonetheless there are children who were wounded or killed after they were hit in the head. Unless these were mistakes.

A: If they were children, they were mistakes.

Q: Do they talk to you about this?

A: They talk to us about it a lot. They forbid us to shoot children.

Q: How do they say it?

A: You don't shoot a child who is 12 or younger.

Q: That is, shooting a child of 12 or older is permissible?

A: Twelve and up is allowed. He's not a child anymore, he's already had his bar mitzvah. Something like that.

Q: Thirteen is bar mitzvah age.

A: Twelve and up you're allowed to shoot. That's what they tell us.

Q: Again: you're allowed to shoot children age 12 and up.

A: Because by definition it doesn't seem to me to be a child anymore, even though in the United States a child can be 23.

Q: Under international law, a child is defined as someone under the age of 18.

A: Up to 18 is a child?

Q: So according to the IDF, is it 12?

A: According to what the IDF tells its soldiers. I don't know if this is what the IDF tells the media.

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Such is the definition of an adult according to IDF counterinsurgency policy. It is no wonder that discursive prohibitions in Israeli military circles have been so loosened that Israeli officers can openly speak of studying the German military's strategy in putting down the Jewish revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto during the battle of Jenin; or that current chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon can call the Palestinians a "cancer" that needs to be eradicated. These may sound like public relations faux pas. But, given the IDF's attitude towards human life as documented in Hass' interview, they are redolent of much larger moral problems than bad self-editing. And this is exactly what Chacham's reservists are rebelling against.

While Chacham may be preoccupied by the moral crisis of the Israeli military and Hass by the moral transgressions of the Israeli army, Tanya Reinhart, a professor of linguistics at Tel Aviv University and a journalist in her own right (she writes a bi-weekly column for *Ha'aretz* competitor *Yediot Ahronot*), concerns herself with history in *Israel/Palestine: How To End The War Of 1948* (in this case, what led to the failure of the Oslo Accords, and the onset of the Al-Aksa Intifada). A

brutally detailed, intensely bitter history of the first two years of the war, Reinhart recounts the real sources of the conflict and engages in painstaking criticism of the level of deception indulged in by Ehud Barak in his calls for a final settlement with the Palestinians. Reinhart paints Barak as the most profound of sophists, consistently constructing elaborate linguistic scenarios to essentially do nothing other than maintain the status quo.

Though Ehud Barak is not the sole focus of Reinhart's book, her criticism of the piano-playing former general is in many respects *Israel/Palestine's* core, because Barak's moral inconsistencies epitomize everything that is wrong with the Israeli political establishment. To summarize it in one word: disingenuous—with Israel itself and with the outside world. This is where Reinhart's background in linguistics seems to shine through, because in her reading, Israeli political power is exercised through the weaving of remarkable webs of deception. There is no such thing as "discourse," per say, of the kind that linguistic political theorists attribute to a properly functioning democracy, but rather a continuous monologue of denial engaged in by the Israeli political establishment. The end result is a profound lack of moral self-

reflexivity that Israelis assimilate and reproduce, that both assists Israelis in covering up for their own complicity in their country's policies and makes it impossible to move the peace process forward.

The beauty of Reinhart's arguments is that they do not make such points philosophically. Rather, as the narrative of *Israel/Palestine* pushes to a close, Reinhart's conclusions become inescapable. In this sense, *Israel/Palestine* is more than just your average piece of critical historiography. It is also a highly complex, moralistic critique of a suicidal national ideology promulgated by a military-dominated political elite that cannot justify its political authority without a permanent state of war. Nevertheless, Reinhart's book remains a popular history, the first to be written during the current conflict.

Intensely researched and energetically argued, *Israel/Palestine*—like *Breaking Ranks* and *Reporting From Ramallah*—is an excellent addition to a growing body of progressive Israeli literature that shows no sign of letting up. War may not be good for very much. But if the humanity present in these recent publications is any indication, the Al-Aksa Intifada might just be sowing the seeds of a new and reinvigorated Israeli left. □