

Breaking the silences:

*Acknowledging our own stories,
talking with our families and the nation*

**An interview with Yehuda Shaul
by Virginia Leake**

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Breaking the Silence is an organisation of young Israelis who are publicly sharing the stories and images of what they were involved with when serving in the military in the occupied Palestinian Territories. Their work is contributing to debate within Israeli society and their exhibitions have also travelled the world, raising awareness of the consequences of occupation wherever it is taking place. This interview describes the different sorts of silences – personal, familial, national – that act to sustain occupation and the work that is required to change this. The following piece will be relevant not only to those with an interest in the Middle East, but also for those working with the military, ex-military and their families, and for those working with people who are trying to come to terms with what they may have participated with in the past. The interview took place in Jerusalem. The interviewer was Virginia Leake, who works at Dulwich Centre Publications.

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Can we begin with you telling us about yourself and your experiences in the army?

My name is Yehuda Shaul and I'm twenty-three years old. When I reached the age of eighteen, just like every other young Israeli, I was drafted to the Israeli Defence Force. I became a combat soldier. There was no question about this. It is simply part of our life here.

I was drafted and served for three years as a soldier and as a commander. I finished my service as a company sergeant. I spent two out of the three years of military service in the Occupied Territories, much of this time in Hebron.

In the months prior to being discharged, I tried to imagine what my life as a civilian would be like and this shook me up. When you leave the army, when you become a civilian again, you start to see things from a different perspective. Or at least, this was true for me. All the terminology and justifications that I had used as a combat soldier, suddenly didn't ring true to me in the same way. The language and mindset no longer spoke to me as it had. Civilian life is so different from life in the military.

In March 2004 I was discharged and as I took up my civilian life again, I realised I wanted to speak with others about what I'd done during my time in army. I turned to some of my comrades, some of my officers, some of my soldiers and I discovered that we all felt the same. We all felt that something mad was going on around us. We had participated in so much while in the military but no one was talking about this back in civilian life. It was then that we decided that we were going to do something to change this, but we weren't sure what that would be.

*How did it happen that *Breaking the Silence* came into being?*

One day, we were looking through our photo albums together. We were looking at photographs that described the common moments in our daily life as combat soldiers in the Occupied Territories. As we looked at these images, which were so ordinary from the point of view of military life, we realised that they told stories that no-one in civilian life talked about. We realised that the stories that we knew, that we had lived, nobody else was speaking. So we decided to make an exhibition of our photographs. Then someone

said 'I have a good friend who's a film director, maybe you should meet him. He'll give you a video camera and you can take some video testimonies'. And so we did. I started to interview other young Israelis who had recently left the army.

Three months after I had been discharged we opened an exhibition in Tel Aviv which we called: 'Breaking the Silence – Soldiers Talking about Hebron'. It consisted of video testimonies and pictures and the exhibition was a great success. We were shocked by how influential it was. For two to three days, the only news item that all of the Israeli media focused on was these soldiers' testimonies about Hebron. Over 7,000 people came to the exhibition in its first month.

We were then invited to present the exhibition to the Israeli Parliament. We didn't fully comprehend the significance of these events. The most important people who came to the exhibition were ex-soldiers, who had just finished their service like us, but they had served in different areas of the Occupied Territories. After they had viewed our testimonies they said: 'These are familiar stories. We did the same things in Gaza'. It was only then that we realised that the story of *Breaking the Silence* was not specific to my unit, to my battalion. Instead, we realised that *Breaking the Silence* is the story of our generation who have been sent to the territories, done our job and then come back home.

In realising this, we decided we had to continue our work of interviewing ex-soldiers about what they participated in during their service. We started with sixty-four soldiers from my unit. That was the first exhibition. Now we've interviewed over three-hundred and fifty ex-soldiers, or soldiers still on duty. These are people between the ages of twenty – twenty-five. Each time, we hear similar stories, feelings and conclusions.

The exhibition has been shown across the country. It's been shared in Geneva, in Amsterdam. It is no longer only about Hebron, it's about our experiences as young people when we were in the army in the Occupied Territories. We also give lectures where we speak about our experiences and share our testimonies. And we take guided tours to Hebron, because Israelis are allowed to go there.

In speaking with so many young soldiers, what have you learnt are the key themes that they wish to talk about?

When I broke my personal silence and realised what I had participated in, I realised I had two options. I could either lock myself in a room and cry and ask for forgiveness, or I could stand up and take responsibility for what I had done. And that's what I think *Breaking the Silence* is about. It involves taking responsibility and clearly naming what it is that we as young soldiers did when we were occupying Hebron and other places. I can't go back in time, I can't change what I've done. And crying over it won't lead anywhere.

But we can stand in front of our society and demand them to listen, and to understand what we've done. In *Breaking the Silence*, we always say that we are holding a big mirror in front of Israeli society to try to show what the Occupation means on a daily basis. It's our army, it's our name, it's our money, it's our sons, it's our fathers. We must talk about this. We must debate over it. We must ask ourselves: 'What did we agree would be done in our name?' This is what *Breaking the Silence* is about.

Can you say more about the sort of silences you are breaking ...?

The first level of silence that we're talking about is very personal. It involves a soldier coming to understand what's going on around him or her. The military way of thinking, the terminology, the mindset, justifies everything. When you are in the midst of the military, everything you are doing makes sense, it follows a logic. It's more than just training we received. It's a life that you're living.

When you do bad things in this context, you first of all believe that they're good things. You don't want to face it's bad. You don't want to see the whole picture. You don't want to understand the other. You don't think about anything, you just *do*. You are a machine. You are programmed. If you truly realised what was going on around you, you wouldn't be able to wake up the next morning and continue to perform your missions.

If you're a commander, as I was, it's even worse. If you show doubt, let alone collapse, then the fifty soldiers in your command would collapse also and you would be putting their lives at risk. So you don't let yourself think. You don't let yourself ask questions. You don't let yourself feel. You block yourself from seeing anything around you. At least this was true for

me and those others with whom I have spoken. The only time we allowed ourselves to open our eyes was at the end of each mission, when we came home we saw the bed we went to sleep in. During the mission, all we wanted to do was survive. We wanted to stay alive. And in the process, we created a wall of denial between ourselves and reality, a wall of silence.

Let me give you an example of this. During our first exhibition, we gave tours in which we told the personal stories associated with each picture. On one of these tours, I was telling stories, giving testimonies, talking about the moral corruption in an occupation that no-one is immune from. I was talking about all of the incidents of destroying and killing that I had been involved in. In the middle of this, two people, who were my age stopped me and said: 'You are lying'. I asked them: 'What do you mean?' And they told me: 'This is not a reality in all our units – maybe your unit was corrupt, but this is not the reality ...'

I started to ask them some questions, and it turned out that they were currently soldiers, serving in a different unit, posted in the Gaza Strip. When I heard this I could say to them: 'What do you mean? I have friends in your brigade. I know their stories.' And they said: 'We are willing to stand behind and justify every act we are involved with.' So I asked them more questions. 'Say you're invading Gaza for an operation. You are in tanks and armoured personnel carriers. Do you run over Palestinian cars even though you do not have to?' They said 'Oh, yes, of course we do that, we have to frighten them'. When I asked 'What do you mean by that?', they replied: 'We have to instil terror to the Palestinians. They should be afraid of us.' Finally I asked: 'Do you shoot at their water tanks on the roofs of their houses?' 'Of course we do that' they said, 'that's to do terror to them.'

This conversation took place three weeks after we opened the exhibition. Only then could I put into words what we mean by *Breaking the Silence*. For me to stand there in front of them was like seeing myself in the mirror seven months ago.

If this first wall of silence that needs to be broken is a personal one, what is the next step?

The second level of silence involves not talking about what it is that we do. We have realised that the checkpoints throughout the Occupied Territories don't only exist to prevent Palestinians entering Israel. These

checkpoints exist to prevent the reality of life under the Occupation from entering *here* in Israel. It's ten minutes away from here but it's *there*. It's a totally different world.

These checkpoints act as markers to prevent taking our experiences home. You finish in the Occupied Territories, you take the bus back to Israel, you come to Central Station in Jerusalem, you kiss your partner, your mother, father, and you're a normal human being again. You don't talk about what you've done or what you will be doing again next week. When Sunday comes again, you put on your uniform, you cross the green line, and again you're part of the military machine. You don't bring the stories back home. It is like an unwritten rule.

My older brother served in the same unit that I served in, but during the first Intifada (Palestinian uprising from 1987 to 1993). I'm sure he did many similar things to what I did, although the Israeli response to the second Intifada, which began in 2000, has been much harsher. Anyway, in the past two years I have never stopped speaking about my experiences in the army. But when I come home, when I see my brothers, it's a topic I leave behind the door.

Have you ever asked to interview your brothers?

No. We don't deal with the stories from the first Intifada. It's one of the biggest taboos in Israel. But when you hear the sorts of stories that I have been hearing now for two years, it's very easy to truly understand that no-one is immune in an occupation. Everyone who serves, will go through this corruption. Everyone will lose their ability to distinguish what's right and what's wrong in the field. I don't know if we can change that. But we can break the silence about it. We can start talking about it.

An Israeli mother once stood in front of our exhibition and truly realised what we were talking about. She said that she understood that her son is doing the same things – and is coming back home smiling. He is not saying a word about what is really going on for him.

Your descriptions of this silence are very powerful ...

All Israeli society is built to remain silent about this issue. It's amazing to me. When young people then finish their service, they get out of the army, they earn

some money and then they travel. Young Israelis leave the country and travel the world – India, South America, Central America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa. There's a reason why my generation of Israelis can be found all around the world, and why so few of us remain here in Israel. We leave to lose ourselves, to forget, to leave it behind so that we can work out how to continue our lives.

Everything is constructed in ways to ensure we do not acknowledge what our young people are doing. For instance, any time we hear in the press about a soldier who abused their power, it's rationalised as: 'That's an extreme case, an exceptional, individual case'. If we really wanted to send to jail every soldier who abused a Palestinian, then almost all my generation would walk right into jail. This issue is not about individuals, it's about what we are all participating in.

Can you give me another example of how this plays out in the units themselves, or for individual soldiers?

I don't know if you're familiar with the idea that every army in the world has an ethical basis, and there are certain values which you abide by in conflict. Well, it's simply not true. I remember myself as a platoon sergeant. On Thursday night we'd have an educational hour in which I would sit down with my soldiers and go through the ethical code we were supposed to abide by. We would finish this lesson at 4:00pm. At 4:15pm we would have a military briefing and then at 4:30pm we'd start a patrol.

As soon as we were walking on the old streets of Hebron, we see a suspicious bag that could be either garbage or a bomb. We have three possible ways to act respond: we can shoot the bag, and if it's a bomb it will explode; we could call a bomb engineer; or we can grab the first Palestinian in the street and send him to pick it up. If it's a bomb it will explode and he/she will die, if it's not a bomb then the patrol can continue. What do you think we did?

Fifteen minutes ago we were talking about equality of human life, and now the life of a random Palestinian is worth less than seven minutes waiting for a bomb engineer. As an occupier that's what you do, because, as a soldier, it makes sense from a military perspective. The logic goes that if the Palestinians know that every time we see a suspicious bag in the street we will send a Palestinian to pick it up, then they won't put bombs in bags. That's an

example of the ethics of occupation. I am sure it's very similar in Iraq or any other situation where an army is occupying a people.

Yes, we have Australian soldiers in Iraq at present and no doubt they are following the military logic of occupation. Can I ask what were you hoping for when you started Breaking the Silence? Are you hoping to change the way the army acts now?

No. I don't think it's possible to conduct an enlightened occupation! What we want is to start a real debate within Israeli society about the occupation, about the moral price of occupation, about what the

occupation really means. We're not here to solve problems, we're here to raise problems. And we have a real problem when an entire generation is participating in actions that no one is talking about.

Do you think that most people whom you have interviewed for Breaking the Silence have then been able to go home and speak about their experiences?

Not everyone, but I think most of them do. And you know, that's really a change. Three-hundred and fifty people, three-hundred and fifty partners, three-hundred and fifty families ... these are circles of conversation that are continuing.

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Warmly,

*Cheryl White & David Denborough
on behalf of Dulwich Centre Publications*

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