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"You don't see, you don't feel, and you don't look"

An Israeli Combat Soldier Breaks the Silence

By Daniel Sturm

09/04/06 -- The midday news showed Israeli tanks shelling the Gaza Strip. In a Jerusalem coffee shop, 23-year-old former combat soldier, Yehuda Saul, told me he had made it his personal mission to speak out against the Israeli army when its actions were immoral. The Canadian American-Israeli veteran said that his "arch-conservative family" had slated him for a career in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). But during his third year of service the young platoon sergeant witnessed a scene of looting and killing at a combat mission in Hebron that had troubled him so much that he decided to leave the army. In June 2004 Saul founded "Breaking the Silence" (Shovrim Shtrika in Hebrew), an organization whose 350 members are all former Israeli combat soldiers who can share similar experiences. "Breaking the Silence" is currently preparing a world speaking tour and photo exhibition, offering a critical look at the Israel military's occupation of Palestine.

Daniel Sturm: You criticize Israel's army, yet you served as a soldier in the defense forces yourself. Isn't this hypocritical?

Yehuda Shaul: I think that I and every member of "Breaking the Silence" deserve the attention of the public. From the first diaper that my mom changed, it was obvious that I was going to be an officer. It's not as if I woke up one day, when I was 18, and said, "Hey, let's go and have fun in the Occupied Territories." In a way, we are all ex-soldiers. When I was in the Occupied Territories, you could have said that I was an American soldier. After all, I owned an M-16 that wasn't produced in Israel. I shot grenades that weren't produced with Israeli money, but by American money. Everyone, and especially Americans, have a responsibility to know what's going on in the world. And since I am from here, I am talking about here.

Daniel Sturm: When did you first realize that "occupation corrupts," as you say?

Yehuda Shaul: I grew up in a very right-winged family in Jerusalem. I went to high school in a settlement near Ramallah. When I was 18, there was no question of whether or not I would join the IDF. The only question was how high I would climb. Would I be in an elite commander unit, or just a regular infantry combat soldier? That was the mind-set I joined the army with. But what I took part in and witnessed in the Occupied Territories opened my eyes.

Daniel Sturm: Could you explain?

Yehuda Shaul: In Hebron settlers put a poster on the wall that called for soldiers to refuse to evacuate the settlements [as had been agreed upon in the treaty]. The poster said something like, "Soldier, commander, you must distinguish between good and evil, between enemy and beloved." In the Israeli army we learned that one must deport the enemies, meaning the Palestinians, but never those who were beloved, meaning the settlers. When I joined I had a black and white vision of right and wrong. Later I learned that everything is gray.

Daniel Sturm: What happened in Hebron?

Yehuda Shaul: Hebron is the second largest city in the Palestinian West Bank, with 150,000 Palestinians. Around 600 Jewish settlers live in the heart of the city, and 450 combat soldiers guard them. Under the Oslo agreement of 1997 Hebron was divided into two parts, with 120,000 Palestinians left under Palestinian authority and 30,000 Palestinians left under Israeli authority.

At the beginning of the Intifada, from 2000 until mid-2002, the Palestinians began shooting at night, from the mountains down to the settlements. My company officer told us that if they shoot, we have to shoot back. We had three well-positioned posts in Palestinian neighborhoods. We posted snipers and grenade guns. My post was at a former Palestinian school in Hebron. Our mission was to target Palestinian houses. I remember being shocked when I heard this. "You mean we should shoot into the neighborhoods, where people live?" I thought about the safety rules I had learned during training. In order to shoot live grenades, no one should be within a distance of one mile on each side of the target. And now I was supposed to shoot into a neighborhood where people lived. The grenade gun is not an accurate weapon. One grenade kills everyone within the radius of eight meters, and injures everyone within the radius of 16 meters. At night, after the Palestinians shot, we received the order to pull the trigger. On the first day, during the four to five seconds before the grenades hit, you prayed that you didn't hurt anyone innocent. On the second day you are less tense, and on the third day even less. And after a week, it's a game.

Daniel Sturm: Was this when you became critical of the army's mission?

Yehuda Shaul: Not really. I first began to fully understand the corruption after I was discharged. When you are a combat soldier in the Occupied Territories, you can't see Palestinians as equal human beings. Because then you couldn't hop through a roof in the middle of the night, wake up a family, force the women into one corner and the men into another, and tear apart the place. At least when you stand at a checkpoint you see the shape of human beings: One head, two hands, and two legs. But when I was shooting live grenades into neighborhoods where people lived every night - why, that was a computer game!

Daniel Sturm: Weren't your actions justified, considering the violence the Palestinians were using?

Yehuda Shaul: You can't ignore that the Palestinians were using violence. But what is our moral and legal boundary, as a society or a nation? Can we really condone shooting grenades into neighborhoods, as a way of getting back? When we realized we were unable to prevent the Palestinians from shooting back at us, we started a strategy called "making our presence felt." We conducted silent patrols. We walked through streets, shooting onto houses, and shoot off grenades in parks.

Daniel Sturm: At what point did you begin to sympathize with the victims of this war?

Yehuda Shaul: The terminology of "victim" doesn't apply when you're in the field. When in combat you don't see, you don't feel, and you don't look. The name "Breaking the Silence" therefore refers to two levels of silence. The first is the personal level, where we realize what is really going on around us. The second level refers to the silence of society. As I was sitting in Hebron, firing grenades, my parents were just across the street in Jerusalem, hearing on the radio the sentence that every Israeli knows by heart: "IDF forces returned fire to the sources of fire." Of course, there were no sources of fire! We shot without ever finding any specific sources. But this is how Israeli society and human beings around the world receive information.

Daniel Sturm: How have people responded to your criticism?

Yehuda Shaul: Very ambivalent. Some people understand me, some don't. In the beginning, the IDF military police investigators broke into our exhibition, confiscated some items and brought us into interrogation. The idea was to frighten us and to declare us as an extreme case of "rotten apples." For me, it's no longer a question. I can't see myself acting any other way.

Daniel Sturm: Does the military occupation make any sense at all?

Yehuda Shaul: We all want to think that we are immune, that we can perform an "enlightened" and civilized occupation of Palestine. We want to believe that we are the most moral army in the world. But the truth is, every time you have a case in the press about Israeli soldiers shooting Palestinians, the example is treated as if, "that's a rotten apple." If you were to send every Israeli soldier who has abused a Palestinian during his service to jail, every soldier who has served in the Occupied Territories would have to stand in line. Because you can't serve there without acting like an occupier.

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