

Photo exhibition « Breaking the Silence »

Decembre 1-17, 13h - 18h, 1030 Bxl, Les Halles (Rue Royale Sainte-Marie 22)

« The Israeli organisation Breaking the Silence has collected and compiled more than 2500 hours of interviews by soldiers after they finished their three-year-long compulsory military service. They tell, among other things, about everyday life in Hebron : how the soldiers see their mission/duty to protect the Jewish settlers of Hebron, a town where most of the population is Palestinian. How the presence of the Israeli military affects the civilian population.

The aim of the exhibition is to discuss the dilemma and the ethical questions the soldiers are faced with. The hundred of photographs exhibited were all taken by the soldiers while they were serving in the Israeli Defense Force. Ex-soldiers who are active members of Breaking the Silence accompany the visitors and tell them about their mission in the occupied territories of Palestine. » Les Halles

Visit of the exhibition with Taayoush group and friends :

1. Introduction to the exhibition, by Simcha Levental and Avishar Stollar from Israel :

- **Simcha Levental** is Israeli. He is 29 years old. He served in the Israeli army in Hebron from November 2000 to November 2003. After he left and went back home, he met some of the guys again and they started talking together about what they had experienced during their military service. « We discovered that we were all feeling quite uncomfortable with what we had done during those 3 years. And also, because that there was such a huge gap between what we had experienced and what our families imagined about the situation over there. We felt the need to do something about it, to prevent the whole thing going on like that ».

They first thought each of them should write down a text about their personal experience. They also made a choice among the pictures they had taken during their military service. They didn't choose the most horrific ones, just pictures showing the common day-to-day life and job of the soldiers serving in Hebron. They brought it all to Tel Aviv and invited the public to have a look at the exhibition they had called: « *Bringing Hebron to Tel Aviv* ». The aim of it was to try to fill the gap existing between what Israeli people (think they) know about the conflict and what they as soldiers experienced, witnessed, took part in: they wanted to make the public aware of the reality of occupation.

« We didn't know how the public would react. As everybody goes to the army for three years, everybody knows what is going on, and we thought we didn't have anything new to tell... But, the people were interested in hearing the messages and the 2004 exhibition was a success. It got the front page of the newspapers. 800 visitors came to visit it. Most of them were people who, like us, had just finished serving and who told us that what I and my friends showed and told about our experience in Hebron was very much the same as theirs in the other places where they had served (Gaza...). »

Of course, Avishar and his friends knew this couldn't just end with a one-time exhibition. Other ex-soldiers joined their little group: that's how the « Breaking the Silence » was born, an organisation whose aim is to collect testimonies from all the soldiers who want to testify and tell their stories. Up to here, 750 soldiers have been interviewed and their testimonies were published through every possible media (books, internet...)

« Our message is clear: the public should become accountable for the reality they created. The Israeli army claims itself to be the most moral army in the world. Everything it does is supposed to have to do with security... Breaking the silence is showing this is not entirely the case. People in Israel should understand that there is no moral way to occupy territories through military ways. »

« I think that in Hebron, I was disturbed and frightened most of all by the unregulated and uncontrolled power, and the things it made people do. On one occasion we were told: "Peace and quiet is not necessarily good, and if there isn't mayhem, we'll create it." ¹

- Avishar Stollar is 28. He comes from a secular educated family, « left-wing and « liberal » in Israeli terms

. » Like many soldiers, he served in the infantry, in the area of South Hebron between 2001 and 2004. His story started before he was recruited. He calls it: « How you adapt to being an occupier ». « I grew up next to Haifa. I had never been to the West Bank although I lived 40 km (half an hour) away from it. But from what I heard in the media (about suicide bombers...) I had a clear sense of the second year of the Second Intifada, which was very violent, and also of why I was going into the army. I had the feeling that my country was at war and that I was serving to protect Israel ».

« Serving in the army is a big part in the Israeli identity: your grand-father and father did. It is your citizen's obligation. In Israel, everybody is brought up to be a soldier and it is obvious for all Israelis to go to a combat unit after your secondary school ».

« I got an eight-month-long training. During seven months and three weeks, the training had got absolutely nothing to do with what I was actually going to do in the West Bank. We were trained for war, as if we were (for example) going to conquer hills in Syria. Only during the last week of our training period did we get information to prepare for our duty in the West Bank: how to use rubber bullets, arrest somebody, breathe in tear gas... Two hours only were dedicated to how we should behave in the checkpoints and then, we got only practical information (how to react to a pregnant woman...). Nothing about moral or ethics. »

« Here is the opening speech we were given at our arrival: we should know that there is no better feeling than to kill a terrorist. And we were shown pictures of

¹ All the pictures and the [texts in the boxes](#) are from *Breaking the Silence*

dead Palestinians. It was the first time I saw dead people but I thought: « This is what Israelis should be aiming at ». And I felt some excitement at this idea. It seemed to me that my military service in the West Bank was going to be some sort of computer game: running-shooting... You get all worked up about being a soldier... »

« ... because serving in the territories isn't about numbness, it's a "high," a sort of negative high: you're always tired, you're always hungry, you always have to go to the bathroom, you're always scared to die, you're always eager to catch that terrorist. It's a life without rest. Even when you sleep, you don't sleep well. I don't remember even once sleeping well in Hebron. At home I'd arrive, fall asleep, get up—wow, that was some sleep! It doesn't need to be a long sleep. It's simply an experience that no human being should have. It fucks with your head. It's the experience of a hunted animal, a hunting animal, of an animal, whatever... »

Avishar continues: « I was stationed in S., near Hebron in July 2002. There we got another opening speech: « From now on, you need to show the Palestinians that there is a new Sheriff here who decides what is good and what is bad ». In fact, what is good and what is bad is pretty unclear. You learn on the way. But one thing is quickly clear: what you learnt before about the distinction is irrelevant in the army. For example, a good behaviour is « not to evict a settler ».

« Now, how do you learn to be « the new Sheriff »? Mainly through « comradeship »: being one, staying one with your friends. Learn they are the only ones who will watch your back, the only ones who understand you, better than your family or your girlfriend. There is no other moral code than that, and Palestinians are terrorists. »

« The great thing about Hebron, the thing that gets to you more than anything else, is the total indifference it instills in you. It's hard to describe the kind of enormous sea of indifference you're swimming in while you're there. It's possible to explain a little, through little anecdotes, but it's not enough to make it really clear. »

« The second element that helps you behave like « the new Sheriff » is the shock you get when you get to the West Bank for the first time. The only two things that are clear are who is what (« the Palestinians are the enemy ») and what to do: « shoot ». But the reality you are in has got nothing to do with what you did, learnt and heard during your training. You have been prepared for war and you find yourself as a watchdog, working on eight hours shifts, with in fact nothing to do. Boredom breeds frustration, which consequently makes you lose the ability to understand why you are there. And this leads you to doing things you are not supposed to. For example, one of the things you learn in the army is never to point a loaded gun at somebody you don't mean to kill. But as we can see on one of the pictures in the exhibition, soldiers do, for fun. So the concept of risking human life (here Palestinian human life) is not holy anymore. »

« We were driving around in Bethlehem, enforcing curfew. The deputy Platoon commander gave an order to shoot some gas grenades towards a balcony where a

Palestinian family was sitting and eating a watermelon peacefully. Because they are out of the house - they were on the balcony and thus violating the curfew... and also because they were surely watching us and planning an attack against our forces. The soldier shot a few gas grenades towards the balcony, and then the deputy Platoon commander and another soldier who was with him made a bet on who will win the "game" of shooting gas grenades into the house, and each of them, in his turn, tries to shoot into the house »

« Many things you do are completely random. See the picture that illustrates a very common situation: Palestinians are stopped on the streets, soldiers check their ID, their body then send them away. For no special reason. »

« ...at a certain stage, the most exciting thing in the company was to compete who could check as many IDs as possible in a given guard duty. »

« If there is a suspicion that a terrorist has entered a house, okay, so be it. But just to enter a home, any home: here I've chosen one, look what fun, there's a number on it in Arabic numerals that I can't even read. I felt like going in there. We go in, we check it out, we cause a bit of injustice, we've certainly asserted our military presence... and then we move on. »

Avishar explains : *« This way of doing is based on a statistical thinking : if you search all houses and check all the people going through a checkpoint, there is a good chance that one of them has a gun and is a terrorist. Now, to be able to believe there is a reason for you to be there and to do what you do, you have to find yourself a military justification for the huge power that is in your hands: you think of your huge responsibility. You feel that you are the last buffer between your family and the terrorists. Your world is only in black and white. On the one side, there are the people to protect, on the other, the enemy, be it a gunman or just a pedestrian on the street, random civilians who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Starting to trouble yourself with doubt? No, never. »*

Shimcha completes: *« This random way of doing is based on a very common concept: show your presence. Make sure the Palestinian society is aware that the military are everywhere all the time... One of my missions consisted in going into a village one night, light oil canisters so that in the morning, when they woke up, the Palestinians would think the militaries were there, even if they don't know why. So you organise random patrols, check ID and search people at random. It is up to you and to your unit. Depending on whether your girlfriend irritated you on the phone, or whether a commander wants to impress somebody. He will send you on a mission : « Go and check 150 ID ! » and you start checking everybody in the checkpoint , take their ID, check the information on the radio, compare it to the data base, send it to the Secret Service. And instead of spending 5 minutes in the checkpoint, the guy chosen at random by the soldier « on a mission », is put on the side, made to wait standing on his knees for hours, while the soldier smokes his cigarette... Such a power in our hands ! »*

« For a Palestinian to cross a street that is not even a main road, just a mere... street, he has to bypass the whole center of town in order to get to his destination. So if a guy

wants to visit his cousin across the road - and this is a hill-town, mind you - he'll walk all the way around the city center in order to get there. Of course he'll be running into countless barriers on the way. »

« We set up a temporary road block. I don't know why, but for some reason I took the orders very seriously when 2 women from Balata [refugee camp near Nablus] arrived, and at that time the camp was under closure. I asked the Platoon commander on the radio what to do with them, and he told me to "dry them up" for 4 hours at the checkpoint, together with the taxidriver who took them. »

« And a soldier comes to him, detains him, and searches him; and his kids are there, his family. And this is embarrassing for him. And there comes a point where you just don't care about anything anymore - an old person, a young one - you check them all... »

2. **Comments on some of the pictures exhibited, by Avishar Stollar from Israel :**

Avishar takes us round the exhibition and stops in front of pictures he wants to make a comment on.

Picture 1 : picture of detained Palestinians, blindfolded and tied.

« A person could be detained for 6 hours with us at the post, or taken to another position, blindfolded, to sit there or clean up and stuff, for several hours. Really, things that place a person in total uncertainty about what will happen to him, and such as a punishment. »

Avishar's comment: « These Palestinians have not been arrested. In the case of an arrest, the Secret Service drags people from their house. These are Palestinians soldiers detain because they want to punish them for some reason - they were outside at curfew, talked back to a soldier, or a shepherd whose sheep had blocked a soldier on the street.... At random. Their hands are tied, their eyes blindfolded. This is one of the tools soldiers have. If you see one, there is a white plastic things tied to his gun: handcuffs. To cuff anyone you decide to... We were told that Palestinian shepherds were coming close to the checkpoint or barriers with their herd in order to collect information. This sometimes happened, but that assumption was based on nothing. So once, there was a shepherd there and I was told to push him back. I was told to « teach him a lesson », tell him he was too close. What « too close » meant was up to the soldier. So I stopped the man, he was tied and detained him for a few hours while the sheep got scattered... A few days later, the same shepherd was stopped by a civilian, a Jewish one, and

taken to the soldiers. The soldiers didn't know such things could happen... Bad and good is all mixed up. »

Picture 2 : picture of a settler in Hebron. Carrying a gun. They are armed by the militaries. On a magazine, it is written: « Kill them all, let god sort 'em out... »

Avishar's comment: «There are 7 million citizens in Israel and half a million in the occupied territories, half of whom in Jerusalem. The majority of the settlers don't have a crazy attitude. Most of them were just pushed there by the Israeli government : « Do you prefer to live in a tiny apartment in Tel Aviv or have a nice suburban life in a house with a garden, subsidies and lower taxes « ? They are quite normal people (even if their choice is politically questionable). But there are tiny groups of very violent fanatical nationalists in Hebron who use force to create political facts on the ground: they take over lands, build new settlements... »

« When you are a soldier, you have no idea of what you are supposed to do when you meet them. One day, I was called because there was « a fight ». Fight means it is the settlers who attack. Otherwise you say « terrorist attack »... I didn't know what to do: normally, if there is a problem with Israelis, the police should be called. I tried to separate the settlers and the Palestinians civilians... The only thing to do was to declare the area «a military zone», which means that everybody has to leave the place immediately. A way to create artificial peace. »

« At the end of the day, this is the source of all evil in this city at present, that's what gives the settlers their power. The leniency, the crassness and cowardliness with which the army handles them. Since there is no law in effect there, they can do whatever they please, one always feels as if the brigade commander is saying to himself: « I have a million other things to deal with, this is not important. We're not messing with them ». So they'll burn another shop, trash another home, occupy another dwelling, no big deal." »

Avishar continues: « The settlers know that the soldiers will never impose anything on them. When it comes to the law, soldiers are above the police, but practically, as the soldiers are Israelis, if you raise a hand against the settlers, you are going to be interrogated in martial court. The settlers have the power, so what you do is stay away, don't mess if you want to do your job properly and go back home every two weeks... »

« So on the one hand you say to yourself fuck it, I'm supposed to guard the Jews that are here. On the other hand these Jews don't behave with the same morality or values I was raised on. I reached a point in Hebron where I didn't know who the enemy was anymore: whether it's the Jew who's going crazy and I need to protect the Arabs from him, or whether I need to protect the Jew from the Arabs who are supposedly attacking... »

Avishar concludes: « You have no idea what to do as nothing is being done to stop the settlers. The police never come, so the settlers feel free to do whatever they want... This is a big responsibility of the state, who refuses to do anything about this situation. »

« I started stepping in his direction, to stop him. I asked him to move away, perhaps lay a hand on his shoulder to try and stop him. Two adults walked by just then, so I was glad I could ask them to take the kid away, he was only causing trouble. To make a long story short, they yelled at me for being just another leftie-softie soldier: "Go handle Arabs and leave us in peace" or something of that nature. Anyway, another incident where you suddenly realize that the children's violence is nurtured by their environment. »

Picture 3 : a Palestinian « terrorist in the back of a van.

« There's a very clear and powerful connection between how much time you serve in the territories and how fucked in the head you get. If someone is in the territories half a year, he's a beginner, they don't allow him into the interesting places, he does guard-duty, he's not the one to... all he does is just grow more and more bitter, angry »

Avishar's comment: « There is a difference between detention and arrest. On the day of this picture, my unit wanted to catch the leader of a Palestinian group that had launched an attack in which Israelis had been killed. The man was detained with other men of his militia. Among the soldiers the atmosphere was festive: we were happy to have caught them. But the commander (i.e. a professional soldier in his late 30s, the ultimate authority) came to one of the officers and said to him: « This Palestinian sits so comfortably! Make him sit on splinters! » And he started to slap the man, kick him, beat him up. This was the first arrest I participated in. One of my friends asked me if I had slapped the guy too. I had seen my friends and the commander do so, so I kicked the guy too. After that, the guy was to be taken to the military base. Only soldiers went with him and they beat the guy mercilessly, played with him, forced him to say: « I love the army ». But the guy was staying quite... One of the soldiers phoned his father: « Do you want me to beat him? » And he beat the guy up so that his father could hear him scream... From that point on, all the Palestinians we arrested were treated the same way: kicks, slaps... Most of them were members of organisations that were illegal, according to Israel, or were the relatives of people that the army was looking for. Sometimes the soldiers didn't even know why they had arrested that guy: they had just banged on his door, arrested him because they had been given his name. »

« In many ways, you receive the reality of you as a soldier as a blank page: how you are supposed to behave will come from what you see and start to do... I phoned my father about this incident. I thought he would be proud of me. But he answered me there was nothing to be proud of. « There is no justification to behave like this. » I was shocked... It was good for me to have somebody from the outside reminding me what is good and what is bad. After that I never beat Palestinians anymore. »

Picture 4 : memorial of an Israeli baby whose mother was killed by a Palestinian sniper:

« Here an innocent pure baby was murdered, Shalhevet Pas, may god ravenge her blood » -

« Each morning we would enter the Kasbah, go around once, and go for breakfast at 'Shalhevet'. Sitting at the memorial, laughing, joking about. All this at a memorial for a Jewish baby that was murdered there. Total apathy. »

Avishar 's comment: *« You get sucked in in all this... Soldiers were constantly reaffirmed in what they were there for: they see or hear of Jewish civilians, friends being killed. This gives you the excuse to behave like you do, you don't doubt anymore ».*

5 : Pictures of soldiers posing next to the dead body of Palestinians.

« They used to send us to do guard-duty near the battalion headquarters, in Harsina. It was Friday night, and the auxiliary company came up against a terrorist cell, the auxiliary company was also stationed in Harsina, they eliminated two terrorists, killed two terrorists. Friday night dinner was, of course, a very happy affair, two terrorists exterminated, it was on the news, well-publicized in the media, the whole base was jumping. As I was leaving dinner, an armored ambulance arrived with the terrorists' corpses, and the sight which was revealed to me just after this delicious meal, was of two terrorists' corpses being held up in a standing position by three people who were posing for photographs. Even I was shocked by this sight, I closed my eyes so as not to see and walked away, I really didn't feel like looking at terrorists' corpses. I think your judgment gets a little impaired when everyday... when your enemy is an Arab or somebody else who in your eyes... like, you don't look at him as a person standing in front of you, but as the enemy, and this is the word for him: enemy. He is not a dog, he is not some animal, you don't think of him as inferior, he simply doesn't count. Period. He is not... he is your enemy, and if he's the enemy, you kill him. And if it's him that you kill, once you've killed him, then it seems that there's nothing worse you can do to him, but apparently there is. »

An IDF soldier having his photo taken with the corpse of a Palestinian militant at a Gaza Strip hothouse 11/2002

A group photo of soldiers and officers with the corpse of a Palestinian militant at a Gaza strip hothouse, Nov 2002

Two IDF officers having their photo taken with one foot on the corpse of a Palestinian militant shot dead in the Gaza Strip. 08-2003

Avishar's comment: *« These photos were taken by IDF soldiers during their service in the Gaza Strip. The photos are selfdocumentation of the soldiers. These photos are just one example of the custom and norms which have developed in various IDF units, of collecting "victory souvenirs" of one's military service. Many people who visit the exhibition tell me they find these photos are the worst ones of all. But, combat soldiers are trained to kill. When the job is done, they feel like climbers who have reached the top of the mountain: they*

pose for souvenirs. As far as I'm concerned, all the other pictures are much more terrible as they show the daily humiliation and oppression of civilians »

6: Different pictures with always the same soldier on

« I have a hobby to take pictures and all my life is documented with a camera. I don't know what I was thinking taking these pictures, in the army I used to have a camera in my hand all the time and I remember how I waited to take more pictures to add to my "collection". I always smiled while I was photographed and never paid any attention to who was beside me. I had too much adrenalin, looking for action and I was very proud of myself, and yet somewhere I was ashamed of it... I don't know what what happened to me and the truth is that I still don't know. »

Avishar's comment: *« Taking pictures was this soldier's only reality during 3 years. He belongs to the group of the soldiers who founded « Breaking the Silence ». Pictures are just taken to document your life. You don't even care. But, there was the incident of that woman soldier who had published her pictures on Facebook with the title « The best time of my life ». There was a huge reaction, even in the Israeli narrative. An outcry: « This is the rotten apple in the basket! » Even the militaries said it was disgusting. « Breaking the Silence » answered by publishing 50 other similar pictures, so the military and the government know it is a system, not a part of the system. Not just a rotten apple. There was a need to say: Wake up! Don't push it to the side! Don't look for a scape goat! Deal with it! Confront and take responsibility for the reality you created! »*

7. Picture of a taxi at the checkpoint of Jericho

Avishar's comment: *« I remember when I was stationed there. It is the southest checkpoint of Israel. I thought « I'm the last barrier between the West Bank territories and Israel. I can stop suicide bombers from getting to my parents ». But I didn't have the tools to check all the vehicles. Apart from the concrete blocks on the road, there was nothing so it took 5 hours to empty a truck and check everything it was basically an impossible job to do. I told my commander, who after reflection, told me I should send the trucks back to Tarkumya checkpoint, where they have 7 screen machines. Which I did, thinking: « if that is the reason I'm here, I'll do it ». But this meant a 40 km-long detour to the north and one of the drivers told me he was really tired and would fall asleep if he had to drive more hours. And anyway Tarkumya checkpoint would be closed by the time he reaches it. I insisted: « The authority wants me to check everything in your truck »... It took hours. After my eight-hour shift was over, other soldiers came... and just went on doing the same thing as before: the commander had told me to change the process because I had asked how I could do the job properly with no tools. But the next soldiers didn't care about doing the job properly... Soldiers and commanders who don't care about anything are much better for the Palestinians. Those who were looking for the justification/reason for being there were bad. Because, believing they were indeed working for security, they would check everything before allowing people through the checkpoint... »*

« And I remember doing it with such persistence and such a smile, and... I don't know, I consider myself to be a guy who was thinking about the things he was doing in service, and was trying to refrain from doing such things, and I realize how reality succeeded... how it succeeded in carrying me into doing those things without any...any remorse, any thought, maybe afterwards I thought about it, but what does it matter afterwards, and all this with a big smile on my face ».

8. Picture of children playing

Avishar's comment: *«In the same way soldiers get used to being the occupiers, Palestinians get used to being the occupied as the pictures shows : these Palestinian kids playing getting searched by Israeli soldiers. »*

9. Collection of car keys

« ... and an entire family looking on this spectacle of an IDF officer taking their car keys and hanging them all out to dry there and canceling [the wedding], for me it was to see... how the IDF sees the Palestinian population ».

"Do you know the commercials for Itong? "Go on, get going." "Get out your jack." The guy just stands there and stares. He doesn't understand what they want from him. So the commander yells at him that he should get out his jack and begin to take the wheels off. I'm standing near a stone wall and the guy comes over and takes a stone to put under the car, and then another stone. At that point, the commander comes over to me and says: "Does it look humane to you?" He has this horrible grin on his face. It's awful. I can't do anything. I don't have enough air to say anything. I take my helmet and fall on the stone wall, still covering from the front, and I cry. There's nothing I can do ».

Avishar's comment: *« These keys are a small example of Palestinian car keys that were confiscated by IDF units. Confiscation of car keys, ID'S and other personal property is a popular procedure in the occupied territories for punishing Palestinians in checkpoints or under curfews. »*

« We decided to put some keys in the exhibition to illustrate how a policy turns into a system of separation : the best way is to physically separate the Israelis and the Palestinians. A complete system of separated roads has been organised in the West Bank. If Palestinians are found on the roads reserved for the Israelis, they get into trouble. Highway 60, for example, is part of that network. It separates the Palestinian towns, villages and families from each other as well as farmers from their own lands. The Palestinian roads are blocked with dirt piles, concrete blocks. But this is not enough to stop them because the people need to go on the roads. When the soldiers saw that they would keep on trying to use them, they started to stop the cars and punish the drivers by taking their ID and their car keys. The first time you do it, you make them wait for 2 hours. The second time, 4 hours because you got frustrated that this didn't stop the Palestinians: most of them got spare keys. This made the soldiers angry. So they started to take the electric fuses of the car. As they stopped many cars, you can

imagine that at the end of their eight-hour shift, there was a pile of fuses, which were all mixed up. It was impossible for the drivers to find theirs. »

« If you don't care about anything, when your shift is over, you don't want to waste time, so you simply bring all the ID and car-keys back to the base. These keys are some of the ones we kept... »

« At first, I thought the system of separated road was OK. I thought Israel was a democracy. But then I read a report B'tselem wrote about the separation roads and I felt like an idiot when I saw all the lies I had been told about things in this system that are inconvenient. »

« I belong to the founding unit of Breaking the Silence. The soldiers are no monsters, no sadistic ambitious guys. Most join the army from the feeling that this is what it takes to provide security to the people of Israel. I took part in a socialist youth movement. I had read Nietzsche and been talking about ethics. How long do you think it takes to turn a normal guy into « a monster » ? Two days, no more, when put in such conditions »

*Avishar concludes: « Everybody has an opinion about the conflict but when it comes to the daily reality, nobody knows. Breaking the Silence is not providing a solution (one state for all or two states, negotiate or not...). Before talking about a solution, people need to understand the problem inside and outside Israel. Israelis are convinced that providing security is what it is all about. But 3,5 million civilians are being controlled through guns : this is the price to pay for such a policy and everybody has to take responsibility for this and change reality. That is why I'm telling you that for our own sake too: **supporting Israel is opposing the occupation.** »*

3.

4. **Answer to some of our questions, by Avishar Stollar :**

- Most of the activities of *Breaking the Silence* are done in Israel. The organisation gets a big coverage when it comes to publications. The military is a holy structure in Israel: *Breaking the Silence* is using this to try to reach a large audience.
- It is clear that it is as important, if not even more, to meet the young people before they join the army. The fact is *Breaking the Silence* can't go into the state schools. They only go into the private schools.
- Yes, in the Israeli public, there is this feeling everybody is against us. And the people who criticize the government's policy are still considered as self-hating Jews.
- If you refuse to go to the army, you go to Martial Court and are sent to prison.
- Don't be too optimistic about the Israeli people who emigrate. They say it is in order not to do their military service. In fact, most emigrate for hedonistic reasons: enjoying life abroad (India...)
- Avishar doesn't feel in danger because of what he is doing with *Breaking the silence* but there are attacks against people like him: they are hindered from going to Hebron (where *Breaking the Silence* organises alternative guided tours of the city), when they go they are attacked by Israeli settlers, laws have been passed to limit the financial funding of such organisation as *Breaking the Silence*...

- As a reserve soldier, he has to go to the army one month every year and will be until he is 50. Even though people know about his activities with *Breaking the Silence* he is still called.
- The culture of war transforms people: personalities change, moral codes are subverted, values are supplanted and masks are constructed to dull the pain of what they did and didn't do in uniform.

« *I thought I was immune, that is, how can someone like me, a thinking, articulate, ethical, moral man—things I can attest to about myself without needing anyone else to validate for me. I thought of myself as such. Suddenly, I notice that I'm getting addicted to controlling people.* »

« *...you're always tired, you're always hungry, you always have to go to the bathroom, you're always scared to die, you're always eager to catch that terrorist. It's a life without rest. Even when you sleep, you don't sleep well. I don't remember even once sleeping well in Hebron. At home I'd arrive, fall asleep, get up—wow, that was some sleep! It doesn't need to be a long sleep. It's simply an experience that no human being should have. It fucks with your head. It's the experience of a hunted animal, a hunting animal, of an animal, whatever...* »

- Women don't normally go to combat units. But when they do, they behave exactly like men, even worse. Cf. **Tamar Yarom's** documentary film « *To See If I'm Smiling* »²

2 <http://www.israel-palestinenews.org/2010/12/insraeli-independent-film-features.html>

http://www.signs.rutgers.edu/rev_dn_film_1-1.html + <http://www.linktv.org/programs/to-see-if-i-am-smiling>

« Tamar Yarom's *To See if I'm Smiling* consists of interviews with six Israeli women who spent their mandatory army service in the occupied Palestinian territories. The interviews (conducted a few years after the women were released) are intercut with archival footage as well as daily scenes of army operations in the West Bank and Gaza strip. The strength of the film lies in the fact that the women are all thoughtful and candid, relaying directly to the camera detailed descriptions of horrific moments in their service in which they abused their power or otherwise acted in a way that conflicts with their personal ethics. These unmediated testimonies are a powerful exposé of the corrupt daily routines of the occupation and the gross human rights violations involved in its maintenance. But more important, at least in the logic of the film, these honest and intimate interviews attest to the damage (psychological, emotional, and ethical) these women still experience. Most of them tear up when describing decisions they could have made but did not. A couple discuss the depression that ensued, anger management, and a shattered sense of self, and another giggles repeatedly, exemplifying post-traumatic symptoms. While all these symptoms surely occur in male soldiers as well, it is perhaps not surprising that women pioneer the discussion on the traumatic impact of one's service. The film can be commended for creating a safe space for the women to expose themselves and bring to light these personal and moral issues. However, while the women were traumatized by their experiences, the film gives no sense that it mobilized the women toward any action or critique that will change the political reality of Israel. Like good little women, their trauma and dilemmas are mostly kept private and hidden from the people around them. The film reiterates this sense of private testimony by failing to ask questions that go beyond the personal experiences and choices made. No analysis is offered or solicited, and so the political issues around the occupation, its wider implications for Palestinians and Israelis, and the ethical stance that led these women to serve (and not refuse to do so) are not addressed. Especially because the film is about women only, the complete lack of political and historical context sadly reinforces stereotypes of women as lacking in analytical or leadership skills, and as participants, but not facilitators, in social life and its reform. »