
Book Review

Some Refuse To Serve As Military Occupiers

by M. Woodward

Refusenik! Israel's Soldiers of Conscience

Peretz Kidron, ed; foreword by Susan Sontag
New York and London: Zed Books, Ltd., 2004
119 pages, hardcover, \$59.95; paperback, \$19.95

During these satanic times of the beast-men Bush/Cheney, and their entourage of “us or them” colleagues, comes an oasis of a book of active Godliness; of those who chose jail rather than become part of the savage pack. These people take the Torah *mitzvot* to not oppress the stranger, and to pursue justice (unlike George Bush, who claims to have “consulted” with God before launching the war without end against Iraq).

Refusenik! is a book of letters and essays of Israeli citizens who have decided to refuse to serve in the “Israeli Occupation Forces.” The varied writings show how the most sublime of God-wrestlers have come to the not-so-easy decision to assert their humanity.

The inversion of such profound commitment is seen in the ranting of the United States’ dry-drunk, stupidest President in history, lazy George Bush’s oft-repeated remark to his Cabinet, that “I won’t negotiate with myself.”

Susan Sontag, in her foreword, salutes “those brave Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve beyond the 1967 borders. These soldiers, who are Jews, take seriously the principle put forward at the Nuremberg trials in 1945-46: namely, that a soldier is not obliged to obey unjust orders—indeed, one has an obligation to disobey them.”

The Four Mothers movement, in collaboration with a group of soldiers who formed Yesh Gvul (There Is a Limit!), gave birth to the refusal movement in 1982, in response to the invasion of Lebanon, which would most likely have become a part of Greater Israel were it not for their intervention.

Most of these letters are poetic, as evidenced by their titles: “I Am an Arab Jew”; “The Limit Is Human Life”; “Decent People Don’t Shoot Children”; “Discovering the Palestinians”; “In Solidarity With the Almond Trees”; “I Owe My Children at Least One Refusal”; “On the Festival of Free-

dom I Waive My Freedom (Or: What Shall I Tell My Daughter?)”. The political spectrum of their authors includes every imaginable background: children of survivors of the Holocaust; the son of close collaborators of self-proclaimed fascist Vladimir Jabotinsky; the soldier whose family has lived in Jerusalem for 28 generations; an immigrant from the United States who had refused to serve in Vietnam, but then joined the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); the son of a signatory of Israel’s Declaration of Independence; the religious-national soldier; the leftists; the secular humanists.

The philosophy of these epistles are the words of Rabbi Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto others”; the thread that binds them is modesty. The writers claim no heroic endeavor in their refusals, just the simple desires to be able to look at themselves in the mirror, and to tell their grandchildren that they were not war criminals. These people also make clear the necessity of not simply going AWOL, or becoming “gray refuseniks”—those who oppose the occupation and get doctors’ notes, or who leave Israel just before getting called up for reserve duty. One Israeli quotes Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”:

“I don’t preach evasion of the law. That would lead to anarchy. A man who violates unjust laws must do so openly, out of love and a willingness to accept the penalty. The individual who breaks the law that his conscience tells him is an unjust law, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment so to awaken the communal conscience to the injustice, truly expresses the highest measure of respect for the law.”

Refusenik! is not a book of pacifism; all of the writers are willing to serve Israel within the 1967 borders. Editor Peretz explains the necessity of mandatory conscription: “To put it bluntly: ‘alternative civilian service’ channels those youngsters with a social conscience and a developed political awareness into work in hospitals and homes for the elderly, and creates the danger that the armed forces will become the exclusive domain of gungho militarists, skinheads, and neo-Nazis!”

One of the most moving chapters in this book is “The Story of Yuval and Imad.” Yuval, a reservist who decided to refuse to serve in the occupied territories, was told he could perform his service within the ’67 borders. He was assigned to be a warden at the Megiddo (“Armageddon”) jail. Megiddo, geographically within the borders, is Israel’s Guantanamo, where Palestinians may be held indefinitely, without trial.

Yuval went to jail, and the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* wrote about an unnamed Israeli who went to jail rather than be an accomplice to a crime. His story was picked up by the Palestinian journal *al-Quds*, which was available to jailed Palestinians.

Imad, in his 20th month of incarceration, saw the story and sent an open, impassioned letter to Yuval, which was published: “[P]lease, tell me, who are you? Is my freedom