
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

really so important to you?”

Interwoven throughout this mosaic book are reproductions of Yesh Gvul’s polemical posters, leaflets, and declarations against the occupation. Also included is the Aug. 19, 2001 letter of refusal to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, by the *Shministim* (high school seniors), Israel’s youngest generation of refuseniks. While still students, these people stated they would not serve in the IDF until it withdraws from the occupied territories. Of the signatories, five—Noam Bahat, Matan Kaminer, Adam Maor, Haggai Matar, and Shimri Zameret—have been in jail for more than one and a half years.

“Israel Today Is a Prison,” by Kaminer, and “Militarism and Racism Have Reached a Fascist Level,” by Matar, are powerful letters of refusal.

Were Friedrich Schiller, the Poet of Freedom, writing today, of the Refuseniks, he would claim that “a great moment has found a great people.” For these are, indeed, beautiful souls who have elevated their emotions to the level of reason.

Refusenik! is must reading for every citizen of the world. (Of note: the website of Yesh Gvul was stolen since the publication of *Refusenik!* Their new website is www.yeshgvul.org.)

Interview: Dr. Anat Matar

A Call for Support

Dr. Matar is a professor of philosophy at Tel-Aviv University, mother of jailed refusenik Haggai Matar, and one of the contributors to Refusenik!. She was interviewed online by Mary Woodward.

EIR: Dr. Matar, the introduction to Haggai’s refusal letter says that he “comes from a family of political activists.” It is easier to look the other way; what motivated your family to care so much about others?

Matar: It is very difficult to answer such a question, naturally. I can tell you that my father’s biography has a lot to do with my upbringing, and also with Haggai’s (Haggai has always been very close to my father. He actually mentions this briefly in the letter printed in *Refusenik!*). My father fought against the Nazis as part of the Red Army, but had also the opportunity to see the German soldiers as human beings. His own communist education surely helped him develop a strong compassion towards all human beings, and I think this is what our family inherited from him. But of course this is only one thread among many. I was personally very moved by the literature I read as a child, and I’m sure it contributed a lot to the kind of person I am today.

EIR: In September 2002, you were one of many Israeli signatories, who, in an open letter to the international community, warned that “the Israeli government may be contemplating crimes against humanity,” and that measures had to be taken to prevent such crimes. What kind of response did the international community give to this warning?

Matar: On the face of it, nothing. But actually, at the moment I am sitting and writing this answer to you, in the Hague international court they are reading their decision about the Apartheid Wall . . . and indeed, it was the Wall that was initiated more or less when we wrote that open letter. Needless to say, the international community’s reaction to the Wall is not a result of our letter, but of many, many efforts of many people, but perhaps our letter added something to the overall.

EIR: Eleanor Roosevelt has been credited by historians as helping to procure the release of Bruno Bettelheim from the Nazi concentration camps. Dr. Bettelheim, however, suggested that her intervention may have caused his release to have been postponed. Do you think that the pressure that the peace activists throughout the world have put on the Sharon government to release the Five Conscientious Objectors may be having a spiteful backlash?

Matar: No, I don’t think so. There’s not enough pressure, and I’m sure that if there was more pressure, the boys could have been released by now. This is what happened, 20 years ago, with Gadi Algazi. But things are now different. There are voices that are marginalized and thus have, alas, no effect or only a minor one; and the major forces haven’t intervened in our case.

EIR: Is it at all possible that the Israeli army actually thinks that draconian sentences against the Refuseniks will terrorize them to the point of moral bankruptcy?

Matar: No, of course they know the boys will not surrender. The army’s initial target was to intimidate others. They were really afraid the five will have many followers, a phenomenon they could not bear—although thousands of boys and girls are dismissed each year for all sorts of reasons, it is not on the basis of a moral criticism of the army’s deeds.

EIR: The ultra-religious right are a strange bunch. They claim to love Torah, but they do not act on the basic tenets of not oppressing their neighbors and of pursuing justice. How is it that secular Israelis carry Torah in their daily acts, but the *haredi* [ultra-religious] do not?

Matar: I don’t know how to answer this, I must admit. There are of course ultra-religious people who carry Torah in their daily acts. Others? For one thing, I’m sure they’re not exposed to data (in their papers, for example) about the conditions of their neighbors. But the situation is strange, I agree. You would expect independent, non-Zionist ultra-religious people to hold different views.