

'Breaking the Silence' comes to Harvard Hillel

The Jewish Advocate

By Lorne Bell

March 6, 2008

Exhibit documents soldiers' lives in the occupied territories

No military unit is better equipped and trained to protect the Jewish homeland's borders than the Israel Defense Forces. But guarding against invaders and terrorists from the outside is only part of the mission of Israel's young soldiers.

The stories of those serving in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank – now on display as part of the Breaking the Silence Exhibit at Harvard Hillel – reflect a much more complex scenario.

“This is the story of occupation,” said Dotan Greenvald, a 25-year-old IDF veteran and a field researcher for the Israel-based organization, Breaking the Silence. “The exhibit shows the personal stories of how we became occupiers; how we became numb.”

Cambridge is the last stop on the exhibit's U.S. tour, which began in Philadelphia and was co-sponsored by several Jewish organizations, including Brit Tzedek v'Shalom and the Harvard Progressive Jewish Alliance. The project was previously displayed in cities across Israel and Europe, and includes 100 photographs and videos that document soldiers' lives in the occupied territories. “We are hoping that everyone will come out of the exhibit having had their preconceptions challenged,” said Seth Flaxman, a senior at Harvard University and past chair of the university's Progressive Jewish Alliance. “The soldiers don't come promoting specific political ends or aims. They are talking about the costs of the occupation and hearing from veteran IDF soldiers is really powerful and meaningful.”

That sentiment was echoed by Ben Murane, U.S. coordinator for the exhibit.

“Any solution to the conflict, whether from the right or left, must be informed by the realities on the ground,” he said. “These soldiers are trying to dispel the idea of bad apples in terms of military misconduct and to dispel the idea that it is possible to do a nice occupation. Even if it were possible, these photos are what it looks like.”

Breaking the Silence was established in 2004 to provide soldiers who have served in the occupied territories with a forum to share their experiences. The organization has collected the testimonies of over 500 current and former

soldiers. They are harrowing tales that reflect a seldom-seen world where the lines between security and human rights are necessarily obscured.

“The only way to control 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank – very frustrated people – is to make them afraid, and to do that we had to be very cruel,” said Oded Naaman, a 26-year-old former soldier who spent 10 months in the West Bank as an artillery corps commander. “It is a fact that most people don’t acknowledge because it is not a pleasant fact.”

But despite the often unpalatable nature of their missions, Greenvald and Naaman did adapt. They learned to ignore the cries of children and women at checkpoints, recognizing the outbursts as possible ploys to avoid searches and gain passage outside. They grew accustomed to storming Palestinian homes in the middle of the night, rounding up families and detaining them with blindfolds and handcuffs. And they sent teenage Palestinians to inspect suspicious roadside objects to avoid danger and dissuade future terrorists from building bombs.

It was, according to Greenvald, “insane.”

“This battle is for sanity,” he said. “I’m telling stories about what I’ve been through – stories that sound crazy, but were normal back then. And I want to show people how it became normal.”

But despite their life-altering experiences, neither the soldiers nor *Breaking the Silence* has taken a public stance on possible solutions to the conflict. According to Greenvald, it is a useless endeavor until the public addresses the realities of the occupation.

“The solutions were always on the table,” Greenvald said. “I am not speaking on behalf of the Palestinians, but I want people to look at it from my point of view as an occupier and to look at it both ways. It’s not about solutions, it’s about confronting the problems first, and I don’t think people are [doing that].”

The soldiers that spoke to *Breaking the Silence* know their stories may generate controversy, and many remained anonymous for precisely that reason. But both Naaman and Greenvald insisted that they and their fellow soldiers are devoted to their country. In fact, they said, they were compelled to share their experiences for future generations of Israelis.

“We are very pro-Israel; all we do is for the good of Israeli society,” said Naaman. “But whatever your opinion, you should know what’s going on and you should know what you are asking the Israeli army to do. Terror is not an existential threat – it is a security problem. On the other hand, losing the values we believe in is an existential threat, and we don’t want Israel to forget what this means.”