



THE ETHICS OF THE SOLDIERS: My Father, Myself, and the Israeli Refuseniks

April Rosenblum

Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes.

Maggie Kuhn

Six months ago, my father died in a car accident. He was a lanky guy, a fiery upstart with untamable black hair and boundless energy. He would ride his bicycle everywhere and make impertinent political comments in public when he deemed necessary, no matter how staid the gathering. Few realized that he came to marriage late, and was seventy-four. I had worried for years how I'd take care of him when his body finally caught up with his age. It never dawned on me that he might go suddenly, in prime health. I walked around the house in shock; so confused, I didn't know how to talk about it. I dreaded coming home

to my equally shocked mother and brother, feeling that if I could just stay out, in the city, doing other things, I could avoid the aching feeling of our empty, lonely house.

My friends had always viewed my family with mixed delight and envy. Our house seemed an oasis of familial harmony, warmth, and exciting political conversation. They couldn't talk like this with *their* parents, they'd tell me when we were alone in my room. I'd nod sympathetically, trying to appreciate what I'd always taken for granted. Now the house felt shaky. Incomplete. Like a table with one leg missing.

I grew up in “the ghetto”—or so people said. What this meant depended on the speaker. White kids at school said it with a sneering tone, as if the word stood for things they had the decency not to repeat. Black kids on my block said it as a statement of fact, in passing, when it was relevant to the theme at hand. Looking back, it seems profoundly particular to our moment in history that none of us seemed to know the origin, yet, of that word. It is only today that I feel a flinching irony saying: *I grew up, a Jewish child, in the ghetto*. Technically true, perhaps—but it doesn’t feel right.

To my neighbors, of course, I was just a white kid, and to me, it was just our neighborhood. And, really, we weren’t *very* Jewish; at least, not by the standards with which others seemed to judge. We weren’t raised religious, or sent to Hebrew school. Still, when the local desegregation program placed me in a “better” neighborhood’s school, where there were lots of Jews, I tried my hardest to fit in with them. They seemed really nice, and lived in such beautiful houses, and were very smart. But my family never had money to throw around (as my mother said), and I was always being made fun of for being what other kids considered poor, and having only second-hand, out-of-style clothes.

I was embarrassed to invite my friends home, and anyway, their parents felt uneasy sending them into our neighborhood. I didn’t know their prayers at Shabbos dinners, and when my mom tried to teach me, the other kids told me I was doing it wrong because I said “s,” like she did, where “t’s” should be. It would be years before I was to learn that our “wrong” pronunciation came from my mother having actually grown up with a spoken Jewish language—that my mother’s family lived life in Yiddish. When I was ten, however, all I knew was that when I leaned to-

ward the candles and breathed out those soft “sofs” in place of Modern Hebrew’s “tav’s,” it somehow seemed to reveal me as an ignorant, un-Jewish hick. Whenever the time approached to say a blessing aloud, I filled with nervousness and dread.

One day around that time, while talking to another Jewish girl who was my good friend, I said something about being Jewish. She looked at me as if correcting a mindless error, and said, “Oh, but you’re not a *real* Jew.” This seemed to settle it. My being Jewish became a private thing. I felt it at home, where I read voraciously from books with a longer memory of Jewish life. I felt a kinship with the young people in books like *Starring Sally J. Friedman As Herself*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Davita’s Harp*, Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Johanna Reiss’ *The Upstairs Room*. But, now, I rarely brought it up to others. Though I wasn’t clear why, I felt that other Jews had moved on to a different status in America, and for some reason, the advance had passed over my family’s door.

Over time, I realized I *was* with “my people,” there on my own block. Looking around at my neighborhood, a poor and working-class black community, it was clear that even in America—what had been the land of opportunity for so many Jews in my grandparents’ generation—inequality continued to press people down. Watching my neighbors struggle, I learned it was absolutely possible to live your whole life trying to do right and still not arrive at any meager thing resembling success. I had often thought my outrage at worldly injustice resulted from being Jewish. Now that I realized injustice was ongoing, I felt bound to *any* people hurt by those in power.

I was fifteen the summer the government threw all its weight behind the campaign to execute the Philadelphia journalist and former Black Panther, Mumia Abu-Jamal. The politi-

cal movements that coursed through Philadelphia seemed to come alive with the need to save Mumia. Men and women who had come of age in the Civil Rights movement took time to share history and skills with those of us too young to remember. For the first time, I was taking part in social change work not because my parents were dragging me along, but of my own will. I entered, then, the activism that has been central to my life ever since.

Two years ago, however, my smooth understanding of my place in the world was jolted by the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifada*. My dad had been a teenager during the Holocaust, and both my parents raised me with stories of their lifelong sense that as Jews, they had to fear sudden and random persecution. With equal openness, they shared with me their disapproval of the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinian people. Now, as I read both U.S. and Israeli accounts of the Occupation, I felt deeply depressed. I knew Israeli Jews were acting out of fear for their lives. But our experiences of state repression—of being caged in, pushed out of our homes, stripped of the resources we needed to support our families in dignity—were so recent! Still within living memory! In spite of all our fears, I could not comprehend how Jews could allow similar humiliations to be visited on another people, in the name of self-defense.

Cautiously, I started to attend, and then organize, forums to raise the issue at my school, Temple University. I had never been so publicly vulnerable about something that felt so personal. I was afraid that, no matter what I said in defense of Palestinians, my commitment to affirming that Jews also have real reasons for fear in this world would come off to non-Jews as apologetics for Israeli policy, or as minimizing the real imbalance in power between occupied people and occupying government.

What happened instead surprised me. Arab and Muslim students were far more open than I had imagined. Even if they had never thought about points I was making, they were usually willing to entertain them. What I was most afraid they wouldn't understand—that Jews could still be reeling from the Holocaust and all the persecutions of our history, that our decisions might still be affected by that trauma—I barely needed to explain. Many of them had already made the connection.

But no matter how I expressed myself, my views were enraging to many Jews. Again and again, people who didn't know me called me a self-hating Jew, "not a real Jew," or—worst—accused me of denigrating the memory of the Holocaust. I tried to explain myself: how my concern about the Occupation was a direct result of the values I'd come to associate with our own history; how I had committed to never stand by silently as another injustice was visited against a marginalized people. Yet, with each interaction, I began, more, to shut down. I had felt excluded by other Jews so often in my life. What made me think it was possible now to do my work *as a Jew*? What was the point?

I felt faced with a choice. Would I turn away from other Jews, trying to find a place where I could work effectively against the Occupation, distant from the condemnations of fellow Jews? Or would I struggle to find a way to be a Jew, among Jews, *and* stand for Palestinian self-determination?

In the middle of it all, my father died.



In the days afterward, an omnipresent layer of grief weighed down our voices and our movements in the house. Every moment was heavy with what we didn't feel like talking



The author's mom, Judy Rosenblum (tallest, in the back) with her family, at around 12, the year her mother taught her Hebrew.

about *again*, and then, with how false it felt to talk about anything else. One day I thought to get out my dad's beloved mini-disk recorder and start documenting the stories we were telling. It would break the tension, and besides, it would be a treasure someday, something really worth saving.

At first we told story after story about my dad, and what it was like for us to go through our first weeks without him. But gradually, as the machine kept running, my mother's stories turned to herself. One day she spoke of the year her mother taught her Hebrew at home. Why, I wondered, hadn't her mother sent her to Hebrew school?

"Well, she wanted to. But we couldn't afford it," she said. "You had to be a member of the synagogue, and we were dirt poor. But they had a new building they had to pay off. They had to pay for these fancy windows, and they wouldn't let my parents be members if we couldn't afford the full fee. I always thought that was so nasty—they could have found a way to help us! I thought, 'What kind

of G-d is that, if you can't even worship Him because you're poor?'"

The more stories my mother told, the more my own made sense. We *were* "real Jews." But there were problems in the Jewish community. People had been trying so hard to succeed, after their immigrant parents had worked desperately to make it in America. And some of us got left behind. After my mother's own experiences, she hesitated to enroll me in Hebrew school and put me through that struggle to fit in.

We were planning the memorial. As I tried to make a space in my hysteria to imagine how to mark my dad's life and death, it came to me that what I really yearned for was simply to stand up for him and say the Mourner's Kaddish. My mother thought it was curious, and I couldn't really explain it, but for the first time—despite my fears of messing up—I *wanted* to recite a prayer in public. I asked Jews who cared about me to come and be present, and I wrote a speech to honor my dad's life as a Jew and an activist. I included what I felt was his most telling story.

One of my middle names is Jenny, which I had never understood. One day I asked my father what it stood for, and he told me this: When my father was twelve years old, in 1939, stories began to spread among American Jews about what was happening to their relatives in Europe under Nazi rule. But many dismissed the rumors as alarmist. They could not believe that things could be *that bad*. Finally my father's synagogue sent a respected member of the congregation to Europe to see for himself and come back with a report. This man returned and told them, "It is everything we have heard and worse. The only thing that can alter the situation is if America goes to war against Germany." He was, for my father's community, what Moshe the Beadle was for Elie Wiesel's village in *Night*—a voice

of warning about what was to come, if only people could be made to hear.

Now, my father was a stout young pacifist, having read the World War I novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. He couldn't believe the only way to stop the existing massacres was to initiate more. He felt that it was up to him to change the course of events: He would stow away on a boat to Germany, go personally to speak with Hitler, and persuade him to stop what he was doing. He figured that if he managed to get to Germany he might have a chance, and that if he was caught instead, his story would be reported in the papers. Then, either another kid would be inspired to complete his mission, or the adults would finally come to their senses and figure out how to resolve the conflict through principled discussion instead of war.

Every day, he planned to go to the docks and stow away, but every day he lost his nerve and chickened out. And then, when he was fourteen, America entered the war. My father was horrified. He was convinced that both Hitler's continuing massacres and the onset of war were his fault because he hadn't taken action to stop it. This depressed him so deeply that he resolved to commit suicide. Every day, he planned it out, and every day, he lost his nerve. He felt awful about it—until he became friends with a sixteen-year-old boy he knew and the boy's girlfriend, Jenny. They were both so nice to my dad, and so visibly happy to be in love, that my father realized: If I don't kill myself, I might someday fall in love. And that was a reason to live.

Throughout my father's life, he brought that sense of personal responsibility and determination to everything he did. Rather than pursue well-paying careers, he printed newspapers that promoted his ideals and supported himself, and us, on whatever donations such work brought in. He was completely



Art Rosenblum at 12.

driven. He did not see social justice work as a good deed, for spare time. It was such an unquestionable duty to him that I don't remember him ever saying to me, in so many words, 'people should live in this way.' He didn't have the ability to detach himself while other people suffered, and he barely seemed to notice that this was a less-than-typical way to live.

One of the last times we spent together was when an Israeli soldier came to speak at a local synagogue. The young man, a high-ranking IDF officer, had joined several hundred other "Refuseniks" in publicly stating that, though they would not hesitate to fight to defend their country, they could no longer morally reconcile their participation in the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They would herein refuse to serve in the territories captured by Israel in 1967. He spoke quietly about the daily humiliations he had inflicted on Palestinian people in his previous duties there.

He responded to both supportive and condemning comments from the congregation, and described how difficult the choice had been for him. The “Refuseniks” face great consequences for their decision. Many are imprisoned for a time; all face the stigma of being called a traitor, the likelihood of losing their jobs. All risk that their neighbors, colleagues, friends and family may not forgive their choice.

Military service is different in Israel from the U.S. Here, all men are required to register; but only those who are particularly patriotic—or need the work, or college tuition—choose to join in large numbers. To many Israelis I know, service is compulsory not only in the sense of being required for every young person, but also in a deeply personal sense. It is a moral obligation to carry one’s share of the weight: a rite of passage, woven inextricably into what it means to be Israeli.

I remember the first time I heard of *Ometz L’Sarev*, the “Courage to Refuse” movement. After months of devastating news, one day I opened the paper and there it was: a tiny Associated Press article that gave me my first glimmer of hope since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*. I started crying on the subway where I sat, thinking, “Finally, people are doing what must be done. They give us back the ability to be Jews, and human, and unashamed.”

As students, when we learn about successful social movements from the past, we are taught about their heroism as if the righteousness of their stances must always have been clear. People like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are raised up as examples. Who now would deny the value of his message? Yet, in that unglamorous moment in which a few lone human beings step forward, acting on their private convictions to cross a line into the unknown, things are not always so clear. Those

first few who stand up against the flow of accepted behavior often appear mad to their observers; misled; acting out of dangerous naiveté. In his early days, King himself was resisted—not only by defenders of Jim Crow, but by fellow preachers in other black churches. The more fear grips us, the harder it is for us to see that the people who are walking shakily toward the edge of our known worlds may be recognized in twenty or fifty years as the first brave harbingers of evolution. If our fear succeeds in blocking them out, they are pushed back into the recesses of history. Their unheeded pleas, like Moshe the Beadle’s, glimmer through the darkness of retrospect.

Slowly, without allowing myself a moment of formal decision in which my fears might overpower what I knew was right, I made my choice.

I started making up for lost time, educating myself in every spare moment about Jewish and Israeli history, secular and religious tradition and culture. I would teach myself the Hebrew aleph-bet on the bus ride to work, and read I.F. Stone’s *Underground to Palestine* on the ride home. I sought out other Jews who were struggling against the Occupation, and coping with the grief of isolation from their Jewish communities. With my dad’s recorder, I began to interview all different kinds of Jews about Israel, Palestine, and what it means to be a Jew at this moment in history.

I wanted to understand them all, and to help them understand the ones like me: the young ones, who go home for holidays to families where everyone has agreed to avoid the issue, to keep the family from breaking apart. Far from being the rootless, petulant rebels we’re described as, so many of us are living in the taut space between multiple fears. On the one hand, by doing what we feel morally obliged to do, speaking out about the Occupation, a part of us fears making Jews

even more vulnerable to attacks. At the same time we live in fear of being rejected by our families. What a horrible possibility for a young Jew, who is born into the world having lost so much already; in whose ears all the ghosts of fascist Europe still sound their melancholy voices; who still lives with fears that cannot totally be explained to outsiders.

And I am afraid of losing my people even before I've had them. Because, despite all my experiences with classism and rejection by Jews, I long to be connected to my people, my history. And nothing frightens me more than the possibility of giving it one, last, serious try, and being definitively rejected by the people who will always understand certain parts of me in ways no one else can. But the ethical thing for me to do is to speak, and so I do, willing the friction inside me to become a spiritual power, propelling my words into the world with greater and greater force until our self-imprisoning walls come tumbling down.

In my Judaism class this semester, my teacher explains the word *mitzvah*. Frequently interpreted as *good deed*, it means *commandment*. Judaism grants no special merit, she says, to people who do nice things out of the kindness of their hearts. That's well and good, but we act on *mitzvot* because we are commanded to, whether we like it or not. At first it makes me prickle with disgust—how narrow! But then I think of my father—how he lived his life as if there were no question of whether one sacrifices in order to improve the lot of all people. And I see, suddenly, what is meant when people from deeply Orthodox traditions say that what appears limiting can actually be a great liberation.

Another week, my teacher tells us of a lesson in *Pirke Avot*. The Ethics of the Fathers teach us not to separate ourselves from our people. The choice I've made cancels out an option that once lay open to me, of imagining

myself above other Jews, shaking my head sadly at "their" state of affairs. But equally, it reminds me: I have come from *many* peoples. If we were to decide that "our people" is all humanity, how would we live this teaching?

What is common between myself and the Refuseniks? Forced to weigh their loyalty to their units, their loved ones, and their nation, against their obligation to simple human decency, they risk much more than I. Yet the root of our actions is the same. Our ethics lie in our anxiety-ridden decisions to lay down our fear and walk over it; tentatively, conscious of the eyes all around us, watching our first, shaking moves—but to walk forward, nonetheless, and claim our full humanity: our desire to act out of love for *all* our people.

Somewhere along the line, we learn not to ask "stupid" questions or say things that seem naively idealistic. But I ask, how will we arrive at truly just solutions if we don't open our sights wide to the greatest ideal, the closest to complete justice? As long as we are controlled by our urgent fears—as long as we continue to operate in the mentality that must have been necessary for survival, hour by hour, in the camps—we keep bargaining for protection from those in power, signing on to deals whose fine print maintains inequality in the world, in exchange for a place just a little bit higher, just a little more seemingly safe, than those below us. But someone else loses when we accept a safety based on inequality, when we consent to the idea that there is a scarcity of justice and we must keep what we can for ourselves. As long as there is inequality, there will be people who are determined to throw their yoke off at any cost. The only thing that can ever make us safe is real justice, multiplied and multiplied until it is abundant for everyone in the world. I am an idealist, yes—but not naïve. *I am an idealist because I have accepted the brutal reality: that only if we reach the ideal do we*

have any chance. If that means we struggle and fall short, let us try. But if we hold ourselves to any standard lower, we have already guaranteed our destruction.

My outrage at injustice *does* come from Jewish culture. And from my family, my neighborhood, and the elders who taught me how to raise my voice and make it heard. It is a fierce and beautiful quality we are all born with, and only a critical mass of torture (be it physical or emotional, directly experienced or passed on to us through recollections of our ancestors' suffering) can make it numb. Those of us who are lucky escape the torture, if by a hair's breadth, and retain our outrage. And those of us who have it beaten out of us have the hope, as long as we are alive and have people who love us and vow to understand us, of reclaiming it.

I speak knowing that all this has been discussed before; that there must already be lengthy dissertations on just such subjects; that I will probably never be as adept as I should to speak with any authority. So I agree to speak without authority. Fumbling my way towards what is right. Knowing that in ten years I may understand so much more that I will look back on what I say today and feel embarrassed at how simply I conceived of things, how tentatively I reached for words to describe what I was not sure could be described, how my voice shook for saying things and awaiting the castigation I knew would come. What is important is that I speak.

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EPILOGUE

In 2002, when I wrote "The Ethics of the Soldiers," I was just beginning my undergraduate studies in world Jewish history. Over the

next year, I had some of the most awesome, meaningful experiences as I worked with other students at Temple to build solidarity and mutual defense work between Arabs and Muslims and Jews, all the while learning more and more about Jewish history.

In the process, I came up against some realizations I would have given anything to avoid: Namely, that the political cycles that produce periodic surges in violence against Jews are still moving like clockwork; and that my own movements lack an understanding of what Jewish oppression is—which leads us to humor antisemitism in our own midst, when we should be analyzing it as a global phenomenon and integrating our resistance to it into our everyday work for liberation. Far from being a task we can put off until some future, more relaxed time, recognizing antisemitism in a radical way and fighting it with the tools that only grassroots movements have at our disposal is vital—now.

To keep doing all the political work that matters to me, I had to be able to confront that. So upon graduation I set aside thirteen months for an independent research project, "If Not Together, How?: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements." For the project, I've been conducting a 9-month training to help local non-Jewish activists build skills to be allies to Jews while doing their wider social justice work; I've traveled to Argentina to observe contemporary antisemitism outside the U.S., interviewed key U.S. activists who have made progress in bringing conversations about antisemitism to their movements, and used all that I've learned to design resources for activists about antisemitism, including a pamphlet for mass distribution, to be made public at the end of June, 2006. You can learn more about this project, or find out how to support it, at www.pinteleiyid.com.

When I look back on this essay, more than anything I feel it's about class—which is in fact mentioned only rarely. Perhaps that's because of all the issues, that's the one most unresolved. I can find places to talk about Palestine among Jews; I've learned Yiddish and made Yiddish-speaking friends; I can talk proudly about my secular Jewish identity to all kinds of Jews. But when I bring up the isolation that

Jews raised working-class or poor feel—isolation that often keeps them from even making contact with their local Jewish community—I still get uncomprehending looks and skepticism about whether such people really exist.

Thank you to Dr. Laura Levitt and Rebecca Subar for their support, and to my mother Judy Rosenblum, and all the working-class Jews I know, and don't know, and love.

NOTE

Photo on page 36: Art, Judy and April Rosenblum (on Art's shoulders) in the early 1980s. All photos courtesy of the author.