Violence, Morality and Tragedy
The Israeli Soldier in the Hebrew Literature of the Intifada

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Abstract
This article examines the portrait of Israeli soldier in the Hebrew literature written in the last two decades in the shadow of the Intifada. The reality of Israeli-Palestinian relationships in general and the Occupation in particular raises many ethical questions regarding the use of military force, humanism, the nature of the State of Israel as a democracy, the duality of citizens who are soldiers, and the nature of education of younger generations. In this article I discuss four literary texts that reveal a range of perspectives on the situation, shedding light on different protagonists with different political and moral views, and confronting the question of violence and its roots.

Key Words: Hebrew Literature, Intifada, soldiers, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ethics, moral luck.

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1.   Introduction

In Ben-Ner's novel *Delusion* (1989), Holly, the protagonist - whose name might hint at his virtuous nature - finds himself cruelly kicking a Palestinian Arab. Initially, his friends encouraged him to begin torturing Palestinians. The "straight-laced kid" from Tel-Aviv is surprised to discover the power he wields, and feels satisfaction when he sees that the Arab, out of fear, loses control over his bodily functions.

Delusion is but one example of Hebrew literature written by Jews in Israel to grapple with the Israeli Occupation and the First and Second Palestinian Intifadas. Here I discuss four novels written in the last two decades which describe the friction between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians. These works depict reality in the Occupied Territories, re-examine the prototypical image of the Israeli soldier, and confront the question of violence and its roots. How did these young boys become violent killers? What are the sources of their brutal and sadistic behaviour? Can an Israeli soldier maintain his humanity when caught up in checkpoint dynamics?

2.   The portrait of the Israeli soldier[1]

Four literary texts are discussed in this article. They vary in style and thematic orientation. Yitzhak Ben-Ner's *Delusion* (1989) and Roy Polity's *Roof Rabbits* (2001) both deal with the First Intifada, whereas Liran Ron-Furer's *Checkpoint Syndrome* (2003) and Asher Kravitz's *I, Mustafa Rabinovitch* (2004) are set in the 1990s and the Second Intifada. I will start with a short presentation of the texts.[2]

Roy Polity's novel *Roof Rabbits (*2001)[3], describes the lives of Samir, a Fatah activist, and Opher, an Israeli Secret Service (Shabak) agent, and the inevitable tragic encounter between them. A background vignette describes 7 year old Samir being slapped by a border policeman after the policemen took his ball and deliberately threw it down a hill. This sets the stage for the process of Samir's maturation, and helps explain why hejoined the Fatah after his beloved uncle dies in an Israeli jail.

In an analogy to the process experienced by Samir, his counterpart Opher is portrayed as a sensitive man with a moral compass. Alex, his colleague, says that, "you try to be a humane security person".[4] Nevertheless, the novel depicts the terrible essence of the unequal power relationships between Opher and Samir. Samir is a young junior activist in the Fatah. It is doubtful whether Opher would have paid any attention to him had Samir's father not been cancer stricken and in need of treatment in an Israeli hospital. Opher decides to exploit Samir's distress, and forces him to cooperate with the Shabak to disclose information regarding resistance groups. He admits that "the whole affair was really shameful and unjust. Abu-Hamad was just trying to save his father". [5] In the end, however, Opher's confidence as the one on the "powerful side" of the conflict, leads him straight into the hands of Samir, who eventually avenges his honor.

Similar to Roy Polity's novel, Asher Kravitz's[6] book *I, Mustafa Rabbinovitc*h published in 2004[7], attempts to depict his protagonist as a moral individual. The novel is narrated by Yair, an Israeli sniper waiting for the right moment to shoot the right person. However, Yair vows not to kill: "I don't want the responsibility of cutting down the soul of a human being weighing on my conscience which, according to the best of sources, was created in God's image".[8] Throughout the book Yair Rabbinovitch (who goes by the name of Mustafa when he is disguised as a Palestinian Arab), manages to keep his vow until the last episode, when he sees a woman suicide bomber approach his comrades and has to shoot her before she kills them.

Yair's beliefs are put to extreme tests throughout the book. At first he feels that his duty is to "protect the home front"; however, after a deep conversation with a wounded man in the hospital, he begins to see things differently. As a soldier who is trained to disguise himself as a Palestinian Arab, he decides to go to Nablus and blend in, this time not as a duty, but to see things from the Palestinians' point of view. However after this episode,

when discussing the experience with a mental health officer, he says he is unsure whether the experience gave him a new perspective.

Yitzhak Ben-Ner's *Delusion*, written in 1989, at the time of the First Intifada, was one of the first Hebrew novels to describe the horrors perpetrated by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians. Unlike the works of Polity and Kravitz, which use symbolic and carefully worded descriptions of the Occupation, Ben-Ner's novel contains graphic descriptions of Israeli soldiers torturing Palestinians. By contrast to the protagonists in the Polity and Kravitz novels, the Israeli soldier in Ben-Ner's book takes no moral stand and does not engage in any self-criticism.

The novel consists of four parts, each of which is narrated by a different character. The first part, narrated by Holly (a man), describes the gradual moral decline of an Israeli soldier. Holly was raised and educated in a typical family that believed in the liberal values of justice and eschewed violence. While serving in the Territories, he gradually learns to be violent and cruel and finds satisfaction in torturing Palestinians. After torturing Palestinians, he is arrested and sent to a military jail, where he begins to emit a stench. The terrible stink that flows from his body is a metaphor for the moral turpitude of the army and the State. Because of his body odors, he is sent to a mental institution, where he is found by a group of settlers who interpret his stench as a wondrous scent and rescue him from the institute with joyful song and dance, and make him their spiritual leader.

The second part is narrated by Holly's father, Oded Tzidon, a doctor who lost his wife in a shooting attack and who describes himself as a warrior for peace. Holly's father collapses after he learns that he has lost not only his wife but also his son. The third part is narrated by Charul, a secret service agent searching for wanted Palestinians. Charul causes a military operation to fail when he decides, without consulting his commander, to kill a Palestinian who is later found to be a double agent employed by the Israelis. The final part is narrated by Michel Sachtout, an Israeli soldier institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital.

The fourth work is Liran Ron-Furer's[9] experimental book *Checkpoint Syndrome*, published in late 2003. This book is characterized by its harsh and extreme style. Overall it illustrates the process of moral demise of young soldiers who, out of boredom, enter into a routine of torture, competing among themselves as to who will carry out the most "awesome" actions: "… Shachar/stood above/the Arab, took out his cock/and started pissing on/the Arab's head",[10] "while Dado forces an Arab to kneel on all fours and orders him to bark like a dog, while shouting at him "bad dog! why /did you piss on the carpet?""[11]. The descriptions of the daily horrors at the checkpoint soon deviate into the realms of dark fantasy and imagination. The narrator dreams of rape, murder, and physical abuse.

Whether presenting soldiers who have moral values like Opher and Yair in Polity's and Kravitz's books, or commit extreme immoral deeds as in Ben-Ner's and Ron-Furer's works, all these works reveal a confused protagonist whose identity has been shattered. Specifically they reveal a gap between the military and the civilian world.

3. Dissonance

In all four books,the military world is defined as a different universe with its own rules and norms. It is a world governed by the military masculine peer group that encourages violent action as part of boys' attempts to adhere to manly norms of roughness and aggressiveness.[12] In this world, gentle and hesitant behavior is classified as feminine and weak. In Kravitz's book, one of Yair's friends tells him secretly of his fear that "if the guys hear his opinions they will misunderstand him and he could be banished after being branded with a humiliating 'leftist' label"[13].

The narrator's sister in Ron-Furer's text is disparagingly called 'the leftist psychologist'. Even Holly Tzidon in Ben-Ner's book, who tortures the Palestinians, is defined at the beginning of his service as a 'leftist': "Com'ere… you stinking Tel Aviv lefty… c'mon, kick their ass"[14]. Holly needs to be egged on by his friends to begin his descent into cruelty. In recalling the episode of torturing the Palestinian, he explains that he needed external motivation ("I have always been a guy who needs a push"), and he thanks his friends for letting him be part of the group.

Holly and the narrator of *Checkpoint Syndrome* want to lose their 'leftist' image since it is perceived as delegitimized – "so that they will not see it, so that there will be no embarrassment"[15], and make desperate attempts through their violent acts to show that they belong to the group. They are trapped in activities they perform mechanically, suppress their gentleness and morality and repress their civilian and personal lives. Their attitude banalizes horror as though the torture and the violence are neutral, normal behaviors.

However, the distance that characterizes mindless soldiers like Holly and the narrator of Ron-Furer's text is also an integral part of the inner conflict faced by the thoughtful, moral soldiers in the other books.

 In particular, this disparity between the civilian world and the military world is evident in Opher's experiences depicted in *Roof Rabbits*. Opher does not lose his sense of morality, but still chooses to distance himself from his emotions. He eventually escapes from the complex emotional morass of his personal life. He moves to a new apartment but is unable to settle in. Instead of going back home every evening, he prefers to wander the Palestinian streets, and take unnecessary risks – "I will definitely not stay home this evening. I am going out of my mind, and this is more dangerous than going to a meeting with no security"[16]. The endless and risky

work that Opher takes upon himself helps him forget his pain, but "as with all pain relievers, he is forced to increase the dose from time to time"[17].

Self- alienation is also present in *I, Mustafa Rabbinovitc*h. Yair feels that the army has defiled him. Like the deformed portrait in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he feels that his pre-army picture shows his innocence and imagines how his post-army portrait will reveal his inner, twisted identity.

In all four texts there is a discontinuity between life before and after military service, which results in a split identity. The characters' names often express this split. Yair is Rabbinovitch but also Mustafa, Holly's first name hints at sanctity (holy), but his surname is Tzidon (Sidon), a city in Lebanon that has been the site of many battles.

4. Insanity

In the realm of military service during the Intifada, which is perceived as different from any familiar space, with different rules and nature, the concept of identity is damaged which engenders a state of confusion. The soldiers' alienation from themselves, from the people they used to be, can lead them to insanity. As Holly phrases it during a violent action: "just to keep my sanity. Only to keep my sanity. Let everyone else go insane, I don't care. I stay normal, I have to stay normal"[18]. He continues to obsessively repeat this phrase when he is taken to the mental institution; he cannot understand why others perceive him as mad and why they think that he stinks.

Holly's process of self- alienation, illustrated by his inability to identify the smell emanating from his body, affects his surroundings as well. Holly's terrible deeds are immoral and therefore stink. But odor is an illness no one can cure. Moreover, it is contagious; the settlers make it a sacred symbol, the doctor endorses this messianic mission and the madness spreads like a disease.

This identity crisis affects not only Holly but all the protagonists. Yair, from *I, Mustafa Rabbinovitc*h, who journeys to Nablus disguised as a Palestinian, exemplifies the nascent breakdown of his identity. In his unit in the army he has to be disguised as a Palestinian. Disguising himself outside the military setting dissolves the boundary between Yair Rabbinovitch and Mustafa: "I look in the mirror. Half of my face with disguised makeup, the other half without it. Which one is the one with makeup?"[19].

After this episode he is sent to see a military mental health officer. The psychiatrist says in a 'Catch 22' style that Yair is "too normal to serve in the army"[20], but promises not to tell anyone. Thus *I, Mustafa Rabbinovitch* emphasizes the relativity of the dichotomy between sanity and insanity. As soon as Yair tries to reach out to the other to understand the situation better, he is perceived by his comrades as insane. A similar phenomenon appears in

Polity's novel, when Opher's behaviour becomes increasingly more obsessive. Opher forgets his personal life, practically doesn't sleep, and is totally immersed in his duties. This obsession prompts him to take unreasonable risks. Like Yair, Opher's behaviour allows him to understand his opponents better but is considered irrational.

These depictions in Kravitz, Polity, and Ben-Ner correlate with the situation in Ron-Furer's book. The checkpoint syndrome is a mental syndrome that causes soldiers to doubt their sanity, as is suggested graphically in the introduction to the text, with its special typology and absence of punctuation:

> Hello to all you human beings the little slaves how are you now I'm finally free and far away from all the crap you have there in your crappy country[...] I get your plans how you were pulling my leg and fucking with my mind I forgot what I was you stuck me in stinking Gaza and before that you brainwashed me with your guns and the training you turned me into dirt until I couldn't think anymore […] you used me like a robot and only now on some beach in Goa […] it all came together and I saw what you tried to do to me I was afraid of smiles you turned me into something else I wasn't me. [21]

This excerpt draws the reader into a distorted and impossible world. It is a world where the sane individual is the one who escapes reality, travels to India and takes drugs, and the insane individual is the one who stays in Israel and serves in the army. Thus the oppositions between real and imagined, sanity and insanity, human awareness and robotic behaviour, collapse in this work, creating a world devoid of meaning and value.

Tragedy

Between sanity and insanity, between one truth and the other, the portrait of the soldier in the Hebrew literature of the Intifada points to a focal question in political and public debate. The dynamics of the Occupation is an abnormal situation, which exceeds the bounds of normative behaviour. This dynamics obeys different systems and has different rules. This dynamics results in a confusion of identities, that may cause violent syndromes from which nobody is immune, certainly not a young soldier in his twenties. Hence, these texts are a forum for a burning question in the Israeli discourse of the Occupation: can the Israeli soldier maintain his humanity while being part of the dynamics of the Occupation?

The answer to this question can be formulated from an ethical perspective. On the one hand, it could be argued that soldiers are only to be blamed for their deeds, and this situation is a test of the strength of their morality. This however does not relate to the nature of military goals. It only refers to the responsibility of the soldier; namely that a soldier has to conduct himself according to moral rules, his education and the norms he has internalized. Any deviation from morality signifies that his education was lacking or that his personality is weak.

The other perspective, which in my opinion stems from the texts, relates to the nature of specific experiences. Here a soldier cannot be judged separately from his military environment.

The environment, the realm of the Occupation and the Intifada, is considered a given. It is defined as a space that is distant from the normative and the familiar, a space where nobody can act normally, and thus, whoever enters is doomed. Thomas Nagel's concept of Moral Luck[22] defines a state where a person is forced to face a certain situation or conflict that is very complicated and irregular:

> ...where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him, in that respect, as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck.[23].

Nagel presents four types of moral luck[24]: constitutive, circumstantial, causal, and resultant. The texts described here are best categorized in terms of circumstantial luck, defined as "the things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face".[25] Thus the Israeli soldiers reflected in these literary works have "bad" moral luck. These soldiers face a type of situation they will not be able to stand. Whether an individual is sensitive or unmoved, gentle or violent, the experience will affect him and damage his identity and his sense of morality.

This state of bad moral luck, the traumatic experience that leads to personal crisis and to broken identity, elevates all these books to the level of Tragedy. The protagonists find themselves in a realm where factors beyond their control change the course of their lives, and subject them to an unfair impossible test with disproportional consequences. In a tragedy, the protagonist has a personal defect, a sense of pride - an arrogance formulated as *Hamartia*. This flaw leads him to make a terrible mistake, which changes his fate from good to bad. The tragedy of Israeli soldiers is caused by a sense of pride as well, but this sense is not necessarily part of their personality, but rather is bound to the situation of the Occupation. The superiority of Israeli soldiers is part of the reality of their military service and the role they have to play. Hence, when they enter the military world, they become tragic actors;

their lives that could have been good, deviate to follow a tragic path and their identity is doomed. [26]

David Grossman, a prominent Israeli author who lost his son in the second Lebanon war days after his own public protest against this war, described the conflict as a game in which "we (the Israelis and the Palestinian) are players, doomed to put on stage, generation after generation, a grotesque and violent tragedy, in which nobody is able to write, not even a single scene, with the slightest hope for relief ...."[27].

Notes

[1] Many important works have been written in the shadow of the Intifada. Yet most choose to focus on everyday life in Israel during the conflict and do not attempt to deal with soldiers in clashes with Palestinians. See for example: R Matalon, *Bliss (Sara, Sara)*, trans. J. Cohen. Metropolitan Books, New York, 2003; O Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts*, trans. Dalya Bilu. David Godine, Boston, 2003. A B Yehoshua, *A Woman in Jerusalem*, Trans. Hillel Halkin. Halban Publishers, London. 2006; A B Yehoshua, *Friendly Fire*, Trans: Stuart Schoffman. Arcourt orlando, 2008. Yehoshua's novel *Friendly Fire* (2007), deals with the story of a soldier who was killed in the West Bank by accident, by "friendly fire", only to describe the journey of the hero's father, who, following his son's death, decides leave Israel and move to East Africa. Regarding other texts that deal with friction points with the Palestinians, I chose not to discuss D Grossman's highly influential *The Smile of the Lamb,* HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, Tel-Aviv, 1983 [Hebrew], since it was written before the Intifada broke out. Some of the other texts that focus on Israeli soldiers during the Intifada which I will not discuss here are: A Valentain, *Sha'hid*, Am Oved, Tel-Aviv, 1989 [Hebrew]; Y Shimony, "The Art of War". *Siman Kri'ah* 20, 1990, 71-83. [Hebrew]; I Laor, *Ecce Homo (Hineh Adam),*. HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, Tel-Aviv, 2002 [Hebrew]; D Bar,   *Sha'hid*, Yarden, 2003 [Hebrew].

[2] I Ben-Ner*, Delusion* (*Ta'atuon*), Am Oved, Jerusalem, 1989 [Hebrew]; R Polity, *Roof Rabbits (Arnavonei Gagot)*, Am Oved, Tel-Aviv, 2001 [Hebrew]; L Ron-Furer, *Checkpoint Syndrome (Tismonet HaMachsom),* Gvanim, Tel-Aviv, 2003 [Hebrew]; A Kravitz, *I, Mustafa Rabbinovitch* (*Ani, Mustafa Rabbinovitch)*, Sifriat Poalim- HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, Bnei Brak, 2004 [Hebrew].

[3] Roy Polity, born in 1968, served in the police force in various intelligence and explosives related positions. *Roof Rabbits* was written during his service in and around the city of Hebron. At the same time he studied law at the Hebrew University. Today he works as a lawyer.

[4] Polity, p. 118.

[5] Ibid, p. 406.

[6] Asher Kravitz, born 1969, is a pilot, a photographer, and a physics lecturer. He served in the police force in a unit for serious crimes. This is his third book.

[7] A revised edition of this book *First Sergeant Mustafa Rabbinovitch* appeared in 2008.

[8] Kravitz, p.6.

[9] Liran Ron-Furer was born in Givataim in the 1970s. Ron-Furer went to the private Thelma Yalin High School for the Arts, enlisted in the army, and served in the *Shimshon* unit, which operated exclusively in the Occupied Territories during the late 1990s. For a detailed analysis of his book see also: A Mendelson-Maoz, "Checkpoint Syndrome - Violence, Madness, and Ethics in the Hebrew Literature of the Intifada" In *Textual Ethos Studies, A 21ˢᵗ Century Exploratory Reader in Text and Ethics – Ethics, Literature and the Unexpected*. Rodopi, Amsterdam and New Jersey, 2005, 209-227.

[10] Ron-Furer, p. 62.

[11] Ibid, p. 65.

[12] Meisels showed that military service, especially in elite units, consists of the adoption of "manly" values such as "power, coarseness, bluntness and emotional distance". O Meisels, "Before Recruitment," in *Adolescents in Israel - Personal, Family and Social Aspects*, H. Plum (ed.), Even Yehuda: Reches, 1995 [Hebrew], See: The UNESCO expert group meeting report, "Male Roles and Masculinities in the Perspective of a Culture of Peace" which argues that "Boys' peer group life, military training, and mass media often promote a direct link between being a 'real man' and the practice of dominance and violence". UNESCO's program: Women and the Culture of Peace, 24-28 September (1997). http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001096/109628eo.pdf

[13] Kravitz, p. 7.

[14] Ben-Ner, p. 36.

[15] Ibid, p. 15.

[16] Polity, p. 205.

[17] Ibid, p. 264.

[18] Ben-Ner, pp. 53-4.

[19] Kravitz, p. 117.

[20] Ibid, p. 136.

[21] Ron-Furer, pp.3-4.

[22] Nagel, pp. 24-38.

[23] Ibid, p. 26.

[24] *Constitutive luck* – the kind of person you are, your inclinations, capacities and temperament. These depend, at least partially, on factors beyond one's control and therefore the kind of person one is, involves luck.
 Circumstantial Luck – the kind of problems and situations one faces.
Causal Luck –how antecedent circumstances determine one's luck.
Resultant Luck – luck in the way one's actions turn out.

[25] Ibid, p. 33.

[26] See: J D Barbour, *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue*, Chico, California, Scholars Press, 1984;

Barbour 1984; 1-6, 168-170, 178-180. C M Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986. Nussbaum makes the connection between moral luck and tragedy in reading classic Greek tragedies.

27 Grossman, 2003 pp.178-9.

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