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Dear Friend of Justice:

My name is Simcha Levental. I am a 26-year-old Israeli whose army service took me to the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ask me about my politics and I'd say I am a moderate who loves his country and who sees his future here. But I have also seen how Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has led to daily humiliations and harassment of ordinary Palestinians. And I have learned that being an occupier, even one without malicious intent, means doing shameful, regrettable, and often self-defeating things.

I am writing to enlist your support in ending the stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians. I will not dwell on the lethal violence that regularly takes lives on both sides. That violence is well-known. Instead, [I want to draw your attention to the silent injustices and arbitrary acts of brutality that take place day after day](#). We must confront the fact that, in the West Bank, injustice has become routine, mundane, banal. It has become the fabric of the occupation, and it threatens Israeli society.

Many despair in the face of this reality, but there is a path out of the occupation. Negotiations to create a two-state solution can provide Israel with security and Palestinians with lasting freedom.

In November 2000, I entered the Israeli military with a great deal of enthusiasm. In a democracy like Israel's, it is the responsibility of every citizen-soldier to contribute, and I looked forward to doing my part to defend my country.

At that point in my life, I knew nothing of substance about the Palestinians. The truth is that I hardly even thought about them. And when I did, I could only conjure up stereotypes: a bunch of Arab anti-Semites or terrorists.

Despite my training as an artillery specialist, my active service took place almost exclusively at West Bank checkpoints with no cannons in sight. The location would change, but the work was always the same: I would stand guard and decide which Palestinians would pass and which would not.

On some days, of course, we enforced a full "closure," meaning that no Palestinians could pass at all. It didn't matter if you were a teacher or a student trying to get to the school right on the other side of the checkpoint. Nobody got through.

Every day at lunch, we closed the checkpoint down until we were done. Queues would form, but we would pay them no mind. If a Palestinian got impatient and started approaching, we knew what to do: One of us would get up and point a rifle at him. He would quickly turn back. If not, we would make sure that he spent many good hours waiting at the checkpoint.

Of course, if a settler came by the checkpoint — during lunch or at any other time — he'd just smile at us, wave hello, and walk by. [Today, I am filled with rage at that double standard. I know that acts like these corrode the moral fabric of Israeli society. But back then, at the checkpoint, that was how things were.](#)

We held so much power. We ruled over people the age of my grandparents. And we quickly learned that nobody would stop us if we took advantage of it. In those three years, there was no shortage of cigarettes in my unit. We just took them from the Palestinians at the checkpoints. What were they going to do about it?

These were the day-in, day-out realities of my time in the IDF. And there were, of course, examples of more extreme behavior. Like the day my unit set up a surprise checkpoint at the outskirts of a Palestinian village. A local farmer trying to pass through the area had raised a bit of a fuss. He wanted to transport some chickens, but a soldier refused him. Our commander decided to show the Palestinian who was boss. He lifted his rifle, aimed, and shot one of the chickens. End of argument.

It is because of my experience in the West Bank that I am an activist with *Shalom Achshav* (Peace Now), Israel's largest pro-peace organization, and I support its partner in the United States, Americans for Peace Now (APN). The mission of both groups is to enhance Israeli security by promoting peace negotiations that would end the occupation and create a viable Palestinian state.

During my service at the checkpoints I began to ask questions that have no simple answers: Does Israel need to interfere in the daily routine of Palestinian life? Does defending settlements scattered across the West Bank justify the orders I carried out? Are these actions leading Israel to a more secure and prosperous future?

I still struggle with these questions. But I know that much of what I did as a soldier — much of what the Israel Defense Forces still does in the West Bank — has nothing to do with making Israel safe.

- Consider a poll conducted by the Israeli military that was leaked to the press last December: [25 percent of Israeli combat soldiers who serve in the West Bank testified that they had either taken part in or witnessed abuse by soldiers at checkpoints](#). Among the abuses reported were: bribe-taking, humiliation of travelers, and gratuitous delays.
- Polling numbers can be abstract, so here's something more tangible: [Israeli settlers routinely harass Palestinians during the autumn olive harvest, an important source of livelihood for Palestinians in the West Bank](#). There have been cases of olive groves torched or chopped down. But it's not only the settlers. The Israeli military has often been turned into a collaborator in these crimes, despite Israeli Supreme Court rulings that oblige the military to facilitate the olive harvest. For example, Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights group, reported that during the 2006 harvest, an IDF division commander prevented the residents of one Palestinian village from reaching their fields as collective punishment after firebombs were thrown on a road near the village.
- One more example: Amnesty International reported in March that [two human rights activists — Art Arbour of Canada and Janet Benvie from the United Kingdom — were attacked by Jewish boys in the West Bank, while a soldier stood by and watched](#). One of the boys spat at Benvie while another kicked her leg. Arbour was hit on his ear by a rock, causing him to bleed heavily. Following the incident, the two asked the soldier why he had not intervened. He reportedly responded that it was not his job.

Such incidents are inevitable in an occupation that has become institutionalized. Every day is volatile, fraught with suspicion and paranoia. A soldier who sees settlers use violence has orders not to interfere. There's a division of labor whereby the police deal with Israeli civilians (i.e. the settlers) and the soldiers deal with Palestinians. And since the police are never around (that at least is my experience) the soldier absurdly ends up an accomplice to violence.

Allow me to say something else, something that will be hard for many supporters of Israel to hear: I believe that harassment, intimidation and injustice are unavoidable byproducts of the occupation. The most moral soldiers, the best

commanders, will not be able to bend Palestinians to life under the Israeli thumb without resorting to intimidation tactics. That is the ugly reality, and that is why it is so important that we find a path out of the madness, a path towards peace.

It pains me to write about this. I know we Israelis are better than this. So I am speaking out – not to clear my conscience, but to solicit your help. [We need to end the IDF's role as an army of occupation and an enabler of settler violence.](#) [We need negotiations.](#) Israel would be much better off if its soldiers could spend their time learning how to defend its borders, not subjugating a hostile population.

The moral case for ending the occupation is clear. And so is the case ending the occupation to improve Israeli security, especially in the wake of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. Testifying about the IDF's performance during that war, Israel's former Chief of Military Intelligence, Major General Amos Malka, said that the IDF "atrophied" as a result of its almost exclusive focus on enforcing the occupation. "What I can say unequivocally is that the army atrophied for 4-5 years with regard to its fitness. It atrophied," Malka said. "Excessive attention was given to one thing only, the Palestinian issue, [while] other matters were neglected, resources were directed to purposes that do not allow units to reach a reasonable level of readiness," he explained.

Israel and the Palestinians need to negotiate an end to the conflict, to establish an independent Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel. We need vigorous, unblinking American participation in the negotiations. And our need is urgent. Time entrenches the status quo.

[Negotiations are the only way out of the conflict.](#) That has been APN and Peace Now's position from the start. That's why I ask you to support their work.

- It is Americans for Peace Now that argues for negotiations to end the occupation.
- It is APN that makes its tough, rational message heard in Congress, in the campaign for the White House, on college campuses, and in the American Jewish community.
- It is APN that provides the best resources for the pro-peace community through its website *peacenow.org*, newsletters, opinion articles, and newspaper ads.
- In Israel, Peace Now is the one organization that brings Israelis out to the streets to fight the status quo.
- It is Peace Now's Settlement Watch project that monitors the construction of settlements and outposts, providing vital information to the media, diplomats, Israeli officials, and the general public.
- It is Peace Now that hosts seminars where young Israelis and Palestinians talk to one another and plan joint political action.
- It is Peace Now's attorneys who, again and again, force the Israeli government to address the takeover of Palestinian-owned land by settlers. Numerous times, Peace Now's petitions have gone all the way to Israel's High Court of Justice, with significant success.
- And it is the activists behind Peace Now that give me hope that Israel can have a future free of the burdens of occupation.

As the U.S. sister organization of Peace Now, APN provides 60 to 90 percent of the funds that Peace Now uses for its activities. APN is the gathering place for Americans who believe that Israel deserves better than unthinking support for its military actions, coupled with a blind eye to the reality in the West Bank. Israel needs to live free from the terrible fatalism of simply waiting for the next war.

I am often asked if I regret my service in a combat unit in the West Bank. I always answer no. My experience made me who I am today, and it gave me an intimate understanding of the political and moral quandaries facing my country.

At the same time, my experience opened my eyes to a terrible reality. It shattered my pre-conceived notions about “good guys” and “bad guys.” It makes me terribly concerned about the future of Israeli society. It drives me to be a political activist, to fight for change.

If you believe as I do that justice demands an end of the occupation through negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, then please join APN. Help end the occupation. Create a better future for Israelis and Palestinians. Make a generous contribution to support the work of Peace Now and Americans for Peace Now.

Our future depends on it.



Simcha Levental
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Raised in an ultra-Orthodox household in Mexico, Mr. Levental made aliah (immigrated) to Israel at the age of 14 with his family. Today he is a student of geography and Latin American studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is also an activist with Peace Now's Settlement Watch program.

Contributions to Americans for Peace Now are tax deductible.

Contact Americans for Peace Now (APN) at 1101 14th Street NW, 6th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20005 for financial information and a full description of its programs.