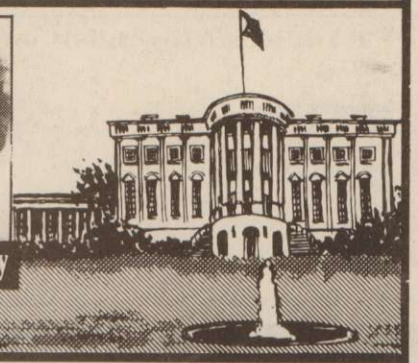


Yesh Gvul means there is a limit. In a sense it has become the conscience of Israel. Begun at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, *Yesh Gvul* is now part of the ongoing polarisation which has gripped Israel. There are the people willing to accept the disdain of much of their society, and the actuality of imprisonment, as the price of fulfilling the dictates of their conscience.

From



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Washington

The new prisoners of conscience

ON the way to Haifa, along the Israeli coastline, the military maintains a prison for its own. Here they keep those who have violated military law, including Israel's small new cast of "prisoners of conscience."

During the Sabbath that came during the now ended eight-day Passover holiday, on April 14, I found myself climbing a small mountain that overlooks the sprawling prison. I was on a climb accompanying a couple of hundred Israelis.

When I got to the top, after a short but rather strenuous fifteen-minute climb, I found a kind of political picnic atmosphere.

There were loudspeakers so that the prisoners below could hear what was happening. There were large coolers of drink. A portable generator provided electrical power.

But most of all there were huge banners accompanied by a spirit of moral rebellion. The main banners, actually one of the few in English, stretched for 20 or 30 feet with big red letters on a large plastic sheet.

"Sedar For Refuseniks" it proclaimed — "Sedar" referring to the traditional holiday meal during which the special Passover prayer book, the Hagadah, is read; and "Refuseniks" referring to those imprisoned below because they have refused to go to the occupied territories to put down the Intifada when ordered to do so by the Israeli army.

Another long banner, the only other one I saw in English, proclaimed: "Let my people go" — itself the demand Moses made of the Egyptian Pharaoh, and then back up, according to Jewish legend, by the ten plagues which God Himself brought



Abbie Nathan

against the Egyptians.

The Israelis who had come to this special protest were young and old, men and women. There was one busload from occupied Jerusalem, another from Tel Aviv, along with a small flotilla of private cars. The activities of *Yesh Gvul* — which means "There is a limit" — had come out to show their flag, so to speak.

In a sense *Yesh Gvul* has become the conscience of Israel. Begun a few years ago at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, *Yesh Gvul* is now part of the ongoing polarisation which has gripped Israel. These are the people willing to accept the disdain of much of their society, and the actuality of imprisonment, as the price of fulfilling the dictates of their consciences.

Their numbers are not really what is significant. Even now, more than two years into the Intifada, only one hundred and five soldiers have actually been imprisoned for refusing to put down the uprising.

And at the time of the mountain protest on April 7 there was actually only one Israeli imprisoned there for refusing to serve. That became evident as the slo-



Yasser Arafat

gan "Free Dudie, Imprison Rabin" was shouted from the mountain top so that all in the prison below could hear.

But though the actual numbers are small, the impact is much more considerable, though extremely difficult, of course, to quantify and measure. Simply because such a movement of "civil disobedience" has never happened in this country any organised effort of this kind was bound to have a significance in the psychological realm.

And so the Israeli army has a rather ambivalent attitude about what to do with these "Refuseniks". Few actually serve time in prison. Many are simply accommodated — which in most cases means they are quietly shifted to other assignments rather than being sent to put down the Intifada in the occupied West Bank or Gaza.

What's involved in a complicated political and public relations calculus on the part of the Israeli establishment. While wanting to frighten potential *Yesh Gvul* converts with anxiety about going to prison; just the same authorities don't want to draw attention to *Yesh Gvul* or create lots of press attention by sending large number of young men to jail.

So most Refuseniks are in one

way or another "accommodated" somehow; and only a few are selected for imprisonment. This way the element of deterrence is still maintained, but the numbers of those actually sent to jail is quite limited. This way fear of imprisonment is always present for anyone contemplating to refuse to serve; yet as little attention as possible is actually drawn to the *Yesh Gvul* movement.

But *Yesh Gvul* is not only a small movement of radical activists to be judged by the number of soldiers actually imprisoned as "prisoners of conscience". It is in itself an idea that is slowly spreading in this country — the idea that there is in the occupation a major moral dilemma which Israelis must confront, the idea that individual protest is required under today's circumstances.

For though Israel is a country heavily influenced by Western ideas and culture, society here is rooted in the notion that the army is sacrosanct and that following orders is imperative.

There is here a healthy tradition of internal debate. But the debate has never extended very far into the area of disobeying the state once decisions are taken; certainly not into the domain of "civil disobedience."

Not until recent years, that is. And here is where *Yesh Gvul* is in the lead. For the first time in Israel's history an identifiable, ongoing movement from within the Zionist movement is legitimising the tactic of "civil disobedience"; at least when it comes to putting down the Intifada. For *Yesh Gvul* does not represent a general protest calling for refusing to serve in the army as such; but rather a specific protest aimed at refusing certain orders to do certain things.

The number of active *Yesh Gvul* supporters is small; but its influence is growing in both direct and indirect ways. And of course there are many who while sympathising with the goals of *Yesh Gvul* are not themselves quite ready to be imprisoned; or not faced with that particular dilemma.

Other Israelis have found other ways to move into the area of "civil disobedience."

Those Israelis who have been publicly meeting with PLO personalities in Europe and Tunisia — risking arrest and imprisonment by doing so as back in the mid-1980s such meetings were made illegal by the Knesset — are part of the same general protest phenomena.

The best-known of these personalities is, of course, Abbie Nathan who was released just a few months ago from prison and immediately proceeded to Tunis to again meet with Yasser Ara-

fat. Now on a speaking tour in Europe and the US, Nathan is likely to be arrested again when he returns to Israel.

And there are others as well. Latif Dori, one of the activists employed as a liaison by Mapam (a left-socialist party centered in the Kibbutz movement and with a few seats in the Knesset), along with a few of his colleagues, have been awaiting for some nine months the judgment of the high court in their case which goes back to their meetings with PLO persons in Romania a few years ago. It seems likely that they will receive prison sentences as well.

Furthermore, within the general society as a whole there is an embryonic movement of intellectuals and activists known as "21st Year."

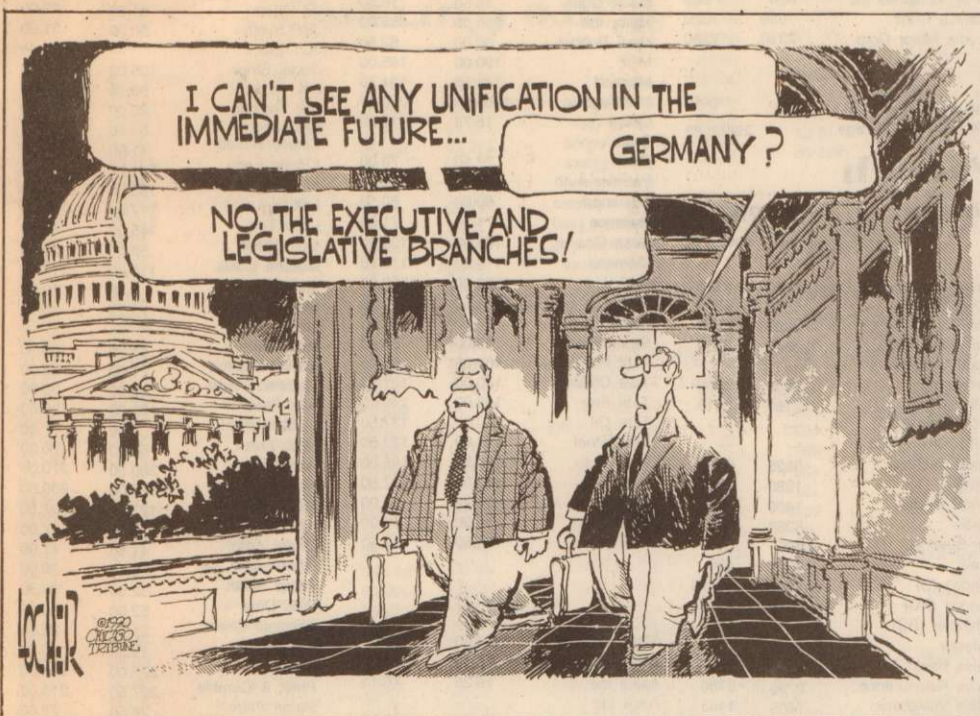
Taking its name from the twenty-first year of the occupation, this organisation specifically came into being, believing that the approach of the Peace Now organisation was insufficient and that a much more profound challenge to Israeli policies was needed. Its founding "Covenant For Struggle Against The Occupation" is a brilliant manifesto about the cultural politics of resistance to government authority; but its actual activities are as yet marginal.

What's really at issue, of course, is not just the question of "civil disobedience" but rather the basic ongoing polarisation among the Jewish population of Israel, a polarisation which at the present time has the country divided right down the middle when it comes to the basic issue of reaching a political solution dividing the country between the Zionist and Palestinian nationalist movements.

It's not only that half the Israelis seem to want to find a compromise with Palestinian nationalism while the other half seem to want to repress the Palestinians until they are forced out. It's also that the country is experiencing the seeds of internal unrest and political disorder that have the potential to germinate into civil conflict.

Those who are trying to lead Israel know how intense the splits there have become. They are trying to hold the country together while at the same time searching to find some way forward; and it's become a most unenviable task.

It's too early to tell whether the new movements of "civil disobedience" will play a significant role at some time in the future. But the arrival of this new phenomena could become an important factor in opposition to the right-wing vigilantism that has itself been growing at even greater speed.



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