

Breaking the Silence, August 2018  
Kalypso Nicolaidis

I would like to share some pictures of my recent tour through the Hebron settlements, one of the most egregious denial of recognition I have witnessed. [Breaking the Silence](#) (and [here](#)) has existed for 14 years. It was created by returning soldiers at the end of the second intifada to gather testimonies from fellow soldiers about their service in the occupied territories. They evolved to speak out more broadly about the occupation and to advocate for ending it. They engage the Israeli and global public by trying to convey what it feels like on the ground.



Netted houses to protect against stones thrown by settlers.

However much you may know about the Israeli-Palestine conflict, touring with them is a unique experience. We toured as a family (Daphne being the minimal age) with an amazingly courageous, morally passionate “guide” who is also the media director and spokesman of Breaking the Silence, Achiya Shatz. Clearly, and like his fellow former soldiers, he feels a deep sense of responsibility, as a soldier, a Jew and an Israeli citizen, and a profound concern for the damage that the occupation may do to Israeli society. Hailing from a national religious background his take is all the more compassionate for both sides. And yes he is a patriot. He and his team have one ambition: to open a conversation about the morality of the occupation as it is enforced on the ground, and on the damage it does to Israel, as to the Palestinians.

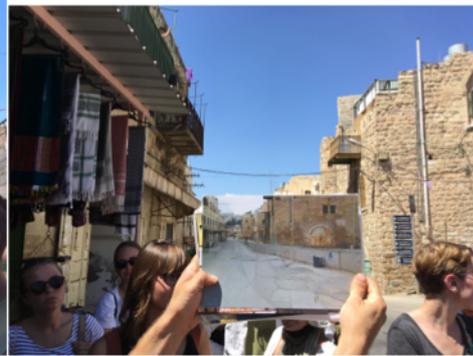
Achiya spoke vividly about the occupation as experienced by soldiers – he explained tactics like “making your presence felt”, “mapping a house”, “softening a target,” “sterilising a street”, or for that matter a whole district, street after street in the H2 area. He fears the way in which soldiers look for opportunities to shoot, the ways in which Palestinians are dehumanised to become targets. He spoke of the eyes of terrified



Palestinian kids, waken up in the middle of the night simply to allow solders to ‘make their presence felt’. We saw how the centre of Hebron has become a ghost house, in vivid contrast with the buzzing streets of the pre-1994 pre-Goldstein era. Shop after shop, street after street, were closed. Lives destroyed. Netted houses. Doors welded.



There is much history and many stories behind all this to try to understand how 850 settlers, guarded by 650 soldiers can hollow out a local society by kicking out incrementally tens of thousands of Palestinians and making the lives of those who remain unbearable (quiz: how do you get out of your house when the doors are welded closed and you are forbidden to climb out of the windows or walk on the street you live on?).



Before and after speaking of times gone and different meanings of security



We witnessed settler violence ourselves with one settler yelling death threats to Achiya from his car, or a settler woman shouting that we were Nazis next to Baruch Goldstein’s shrine honoured

by Hebron settlers for having in 1994 attacked and killed 29 civilians, and wounded 130 more.-Achiya managed to ignore with great *sang froid* a bunch of settler children constantly shouting “liar” in Hebrew, their faces inches from his own, their hands raised to obstruct his every word.



Settler Plaque, terrorist attack during the Second Intifada, 2003

One settler tried to explain to my daughter how a Palestinian had killed a settler couple during the Second Intifada and seemed surprised when she told him that we had been told this story too.



Most notable was the attitude of the patrol of soldiers accompanying us, failing to intervene and even befriending the kids as they harassed him and us, to the point of failing to stop one who stole from a member of the group in full sight and fled through their midst. These kids are not only religiously inflamed, their character has been undermined; they command grown soldiers to do their will.



How do you recover the ethos of mutual recognition in this context?

Breaking the Silence is now under attack. Netanyahu's government has enacted a new law that allows the Minister of Education to forbid their speaking in Schools. They stand accused of being traitors to their country. They fear that the democratic space in Israel is under attack, but at the same time, as Achiya concluded in gratitude to Israeli values, they have a democratic voice, and this voice is being heard, as young Israelis, the Jewish community abroad, or simply foreign visitors, speak up in protest at the plight of Palestinians living in conditions incompatible with human dignity. We saw this with our own eyes. As he and his friends continue to break the silence, let us all listen, intently and purposely.



Trying to cultivate land between two settlements



Blocked road



Achiya negotiating with IDF soldier in charge

