

A Year of Saying No

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Ofra Yeshua-Lyth served as correspondent in Germany and in the United States for Israel's mass circulation daily Ma'ariv. She is active in the We Will Not Obey civil disobedience group started by author and editor Ilana Hammerman, and co-owns a Tel Aviv PR and strategic consultancy. Her book A State of Mind: Why Israel Should Become Secular and Democratic was recently published in Hebrew by Ma'ariv Publishing.



It was a note in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* informing readers that the State Attorney's Office had asked the police to start an investigation against author and editor Ilana Hammerman which outraged some of us. Hammerman attracted attention when in May 2010 she bravely published a detailed magazine article describing a trip to an Israeli beach in the company of three Palestinian girls.

According to Israeli law and Israeli military regulations, no resident of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) is allowed into "Israel proper" without a special permit. Since 2000, permits are rarely issued and so Palestinians are kept out of Israeli view and space. They also have an extremely hard time just moving within the West Bank between villages and towns. Israeli Jews, by contrast, are free to travel in and out of most of the West Bank and are waved politely through the checkpoints by the friendly (to them) guards.

Hammerman decided she would have no more of this. Having heard that her young Palestinian acquaintances had never had a chance to see the sea — just 30 miles west of their village — she promptly invited them to disguise themselves as Israelis (namely, to drop the traditional *mandil* headscarf and dress casually) and get into her small car. They joyfully cooperated, knowing full well that any suspicion at the checkpoint would land them and their families in trouble. Their reward was a happy day of fun and recreation.

The published story touched many Israelis and aroused some heated discussions. An Israeli nationalist organization pompously urged the State Attorney's Office to start a criminal investigation against the law-breaking writer. Many in the Zionist left and the peace movement expressed sympathy with Ilana but were quick to register their reservations on this "boundary crossing" of civil disobedience.

Doing an Ilana

To some of us, however, it seemed that “doing an Ilana” was exactly what we were longing to do for a while. The action fully reflected our long-felt disgust with the Israeli legal system that discriminates against people according to their ethnic origins and religion.

“Preserving a Jewish State with a Jewish majority” has become axiomatic in Israel and abroad. An absolute majority of Israeli Jews feel it is a “must” to turn a blind eye to all evil “necessary” to facilitate it. For too long we have been demonstrating, writing and complaining about the sorry state of mind Israelis have locked themselves into. Now we saw a chance to actively break away from all this, as Hammerman had done.

Motivated by the urgency of the direct threat to Hammerman — her action could potentially lead to up to two years in prison — we decided to join her and follow her example. A group of 12 women (11 plus Ilana) quickly organized. We soon found counterparts: courageous Palestinian women willing to make a political statement and interested in a day trip outside their harsh reality. They all knew the risk they were taking in the event their identities should be revealed, but could not care less. On the appointed day last July [2010], we set off in six cars with 12 Israeli drivers and escorts, 12 Palestinian women, four children and one baby.

A Beautiful Adventure

It was a beautiful adventure. The day started with much tension. There was always the chance that an overzealous checkpoint guard would ask for paperwork and spoil the plan. Fortunately this did not happen. Less than half an hour after we set off, we were able to assemble in a state of euphoric joy — we had made it. The unlawful laws were broken, and from then on it was just a question of finding a good beach and nice cafés and restaurants. Israeli cities have plenty of those.

The recreational aspect was indeed rewarding, but it was merely a by-product. Our purpose was and still is to make a political point. We

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aimed to go public and force a public debate. It soon became clear that the Israeli media would not take too much notice without further prompting, and we opted to place an advertisement titled: “We Do Not Obey:

Women in the Footsteps of Ilana Hammerman.”

Reactions came this time. Israeli TV covered the story on prime time and our action became the center of a heated public debate. As we had hoped,

more women joined our group and hundreds signed petitions supporting our acts. We made more trips, and with generous donations managed to publish more advertisements, clearly and openly describing our determination to challenge the Israeli legal system.

Summoned by the Police

Law enforcement made its move in October 2010, after the second advertisement and the TV prime time exposure. Thirty women, who until then had identified themselves with the simple act of driving Palestinians to the beach or the zoo, were summoned for a criminal investigation by the Jerusalem police. We were interrogated individually, photographed for the criminal records and our fingerprints were taken for the criminal database. Every one of us signed self-bail; only Hammerman was interrogated twice. The inconvenience was trivial compared with what a Palestinian has to put up with under similar circumstances. We have no idea whether the state will take this action any further and actually prosecute us, thus giving us a perfect platform to publicly denounce the despicable status of non-Israeli, non-Jewish residents of this land. A trial against us is bound to become a perfect platform to speak against the military occupation of Palestine, against the settlement policy and the militarized, discriminatory nature of our society.

A Call to Fellow Israelis

While Israeli officials, diplomats, academics, spin doctors and Jewish communities all over the world raise alarms through the media in the face of a so-called “global delegitimization campaign against Israel,” we call on fellow Israelis to start cleaning up our act back home. We ask good, honest, liberal democratic Israelis to join us in refusing to comply with laws and regulations that deny basic human rights to fellow humans. It is as simple as it sounds and is long overdue.

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