

Combatants for Peace Personal Stories



Uri Ben Assa is the Israeli Director of Combatants for Peace, and is a member of the management and the steering committee of the movement. He is also an active member of the Nablus – Tel Aviv group of the movement. Uri was an officer in the Israeli Army, ranked Captain. Uri is also a member of the steering committee of IPI, Israeli Peace Initiative, acting to influence the Israeli government to adopt the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for regional peace agreement between Israel Palestine and the Arab world. He is a high-tech entrepreneur, business coach and lives in Ramat Hasharon.

I was born immediately after WWII. My parents had fled Holland, in a heroic escape, leaving behind their parent's, brothers and sisters. They joined the free Dutch army in the UK, fought the Nazis and took part in freeing Holland. They were both Zionists and idealistic, and shortly after the end of the war immigrated to Israel. My father who was a medical doctor came over to the Negev and established a medical system for the Bedouins in the Negev. He has devoted his life to this project. So I grew up in a very humanistic family and Zionist family. I was 18 in 1967 and celebrated together with most Israelis the great victory. We traveled and toured the big new country freely, the relations with the west bank Arabs were friendly and we strolled through the markets, toured the country, conducted business and were not aware of the problems that may arise

I joined the army in 1967, volunteered to an elite group and did my best to serve my country. I enrolled in the officer's course. At that time the Attrition War on the Suez canal had started, and I served in Sinai doing my job. A few years later the 1973 war had burst, and I was drafted and rushed to Sinai to fight the Egyptian army. I felt and still believe that I served my country as I should.

I started my studying as an electronic Engineer, got married and served at the reserve army. After some years at the 80th, my unit was sent to the Gaza strip. It was before the first Intifada, but the relations between the population and Israelis started to be tense and it was my first time to encounter the realities of occupation face to face.

At nights, we raided Palestinian houses in the refugee camp, in search of wanted people, turning the houses upside down and arresting people, mostly youngsters. I could not overlook the great distress and helplessness on the faces of the people and the great humiliation they felt when we entered their houses. I was especially shocked by the horrible conditions the Palestinians of the refugee camp lived in. During daytime, we used to impose curfews, install road blocks, chased suspects and so on. I felt horrible, we didn't treat Palestians as human beings. Some soldiers beat youngsters waiting for their investigation. I was trying to change things and act more human to the population but was not successful. I asked to leave the unit, and joined a more "peaceful" task being a communication officer for foreign forces (UN etc). This first hand encounter with the realities of occupation and its consequences served as a catalyst for a shift in my views. I realized that occupation is not only land but also mainly people, and that our job at the end of the day was to deny the basic human rights of these people in order to maintain this occupation. I went on in my life, raising a nice family, participating in the never ending race for status, money and career.

A few years ago after I have returned to Israel from a post in Europe, I had seen in the same week two documentary movies, one was called " In the Eye of the Storm" telling the story of the relations that have developed between the Israeli Rami Elhanan whose 12 year old daughter, Smadar, was killed in an explosion of suicide bomber in the center of Jerusalem, and the Palestinian Bassam Araimn whose 11 year old daughter, Abir, was killed by a rubber bullet shot at her by an Israeli soldier, while walking from school home. Both were members of Combatants for Peace. In the same week I saw also the movie called "5 Broken Cameras" telling the story of the Palestinian villagers of Bi Ilin fighting together with Israelis and others to move the fence built in such a way that it cuts them of their land.

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I felt as if somebody had hit me in my belly. I suddenly realized that I did not live up to my values. Letting my country keep people under occupation, denying their basic human rights, while I sit in the comfort of my house, talking and maybe go to a demonstration once a year. I immediately called Combatants for Peace and offered to join the movement.

Very soon thereafter I have met Palestinians on an eye to eye level, people like me but living under occupation. I am now fully active in Combatants for Peace, and feel that I live to my values. I meet Palestinians regularly and we work and act together nonviolently, to help end the occupation, fight the injustice they face, and create the basis for future common life on this land and create a future of freedom and peace for Palestinians & Israelis.

