

Draft resister wants her country to be better

Colman McCarthy | Jan. 26, 2010



Maya Wind (Courtesy of Jewish Voice for Peace)

On a Jerusalem street in mid-June 2002, Maya Wind, then a 12-year-old studying in a religious school, witnessed the killing of a busload of Israelis and others by a suicide bomber.

The horror was a moment of awakening, of seeing the futility of violence, whether caused by lone Palestinian street killers or uniformed death-dealers of the Israeli Defense Forces. Three years later, she joined Face to Face, a group of open-minded Palestinian and Israeli youth brought together to tell their stories and educate each other in the methods of nonviolent conflict resolution -- lessons they certainly weren't getting from the Knesset or Palestinian Authority.

At 18, her pacifism resolute and braced for the risk taking sure to come, Wind became a *Shministim*, one of a coalition of several hundred high school students who have defied Israel's draft laws for mandatory military service. *Shministim* is a Hebrew word for 12th graders.

For her conscientious objection, Wind was given two months of detention followed by 40 days in Prison Number 400 on the military base of Zrifin, near Ramle-Lod in the center of Israel. Amnesty International saw her and other *Shministim* as prisoners of conscience and called for their immediate release.

Instead of breaking her spirit, prison steeled Wind in the conviction that the way to peace in the Middle East, and anywhere else, is not to fight fire with fire but to fight it with water -- the water of negotiation, compromise, noncooperation with abusive power, questioning militarism, and knowing that the other side might have fair-minded grievances.

I met Wind a late last year when she and another *Shministim* passed through Washington for a talk at American University, one of several sites on a monthlong U.S. tour sponsored by Code Pink and Jewish Voice for Peace.

I found her to be articulate, composed and knowledgeable -- and with no taste for polemics. She was deft in deflecting predictable taunts from mouthy critics in the audience who sought to smear her as unpatriotic. "I love my country," she told the audience of mostly students, including a class of my own, "but I want it to be better. Palestinians are being oppressed. There is abject poverty in Gaza. As an Israeli, I find our policies immoral.

Violence is a cycle and I want to break it.?

Before entering prison in early 2009, Wind was one of 10 *Shministim* who issued a statement explaining their conscientious refusal to join an occupying army: "We oppose the actions taken in the name of "defense" of the Israeli society (checkpoints, targeted killing, apartheid roads available for Jews only, curfews) that serve the occupation and exploitation policy, annex more conquered territories to the state of Israel and tramples the rights of the Palestinian population in an aggressive manner. These actions serve as a Band-Aid covering a bleeding wound, and as a limited and temporary solution that will accelerate and aggravate the conflict further.?"

The statement called on Israeli citizens "to look for the humane side" of those in the opposition in the decades-long conflict. If that sounds naive or comes off as the addled idealism of teenagers too young to grasp the harsh realities of the Middle East -- putdowns the *Shministim* routinely hear -- it is in agreement with Martin Luther King Jr.'s April 4, 1967, speech: "Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence -- when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.?"

The valor of the *Shministim*, whose numbers are now estimated at more than 200, comes when the flames of violence continue to be fanned by the right-wing Netanyahu government. It sanctions more settlements and colonizing in the West Bank, it shows contempt for the many human rights groups that accuse Israel of war crimes during the last December's assault on Gaza when 1,500 were killed, it suppresses Israeli peace groups, and it keeps closed the Gaza border.

Against all that, the heroism of Wind and the *Shministim* is needed more than ever.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington.]

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