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‘We must use every tool to resist’: Israeli teens jailed for refusing military service

Saturday 30 November 2024, by [BEHAR Abraham](#), [ELAM Iddo](#), [ZIV Oren](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2024).

Conscientious objectors Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik tell +972 why their wartime draft refusal is a stand for a better future for all in Israel-Palestine.



Iddo Elam (left) and Soul Behar Tsalik (right), before entering prison for refusing mandatory conscription in the Israeli army, November 27, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Two Israeli teenagers were sentenced to 30 days in military prison this week for refusing mandatory conscription in protest of the war and the occupation. Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik, both 18-year-olds from Tel Aviv, became the seventh and eighth refuseniks to publicly oppose the draft for political reasons since October 7.

Two Israeli teenagers were sentenced to 30 days in military prison this week for refusing mandatory conscription in protest of the war and the occupation. Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik, both 18-year-olds from Tel Aviv, became the seventh and eighth refuseniks to publicly oppose the draft for political reasons since October 7.

The pair arrived at the Tel Hashomer recruitment center on Wednesday to declare their refusal, accompanied by dozens of friends, relatives, and activists from Mesarvot — a refuser solidarity movement — and Banki, the youth movement of the [Israeli Communist Party](#). They were subsequently transferred to the Neve Tzedek military prison to begin their initial period of incarceration, which is expected to be extended. Joining them was Itamar Greenberg, who is now entering his fourth period of incarceration lasting 45 days after he [refused the draft](#) in August, and has already served 105 days in prison.

“As long as we continue to enlist, follow orders, and enact our government’s rotten goals, we will live in a reality of war, annexation, and hate,” Elam wrote in his refusal statement prior to entering prison. “I want no child, no matter which side of the wall they were born, to be afraid of rockets or being kidnapped from their beds ... We have to do everything in our power to make sure that the children of the future live in security.”

“We must end the war and Israel’s presence in Gaza — for the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians

alike,” Behar Tsalik wrote in his statement. “There may be attempts to shift our attention to Lebanon or Iran, but the reality in Gaza does not change — we are controlling Gaza. We continue the violence there and continue to forsake the hostages.” He added: “We must move from violent confrontation to a political solution. Only then can we begin to build a lasting peace.”

Military service is compulsory for Israelis over the age of 18, with women conscripted for two years and men for nearly three. Palestinian citizens are exempt, while there is an [ongoing political and legal struggle](#) over the longstanding exemption of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Conscientious objection [is exceptionally rare](#), and the army often sentences refuseniks to several periods of incarceration as punishment before releasing them. Since October 7, the army appears to have increased the jail time imposed on refuseniks.

The imprisonment of Elam and Behar Tsalik, and the continued incarceration of Greenberg, follows the sentencing of five other teenagers for publicly refusing the draft for political reasons since the start of the current war: [Tal Mitnick](#), who refused in December and was released after 185 days; [Sophia Orr](#), who refused in February and was released after 85 days; [Ben Arad](#), who refused in April and was released after 95 days; and [Yuval Moav and Oryan Mueller](#), who refused alongside Greenberg in August. Mueller was released after 60 days, while Moav is still serving a sentence of 125 days which could yet be extended.



A crowd of friends, family, and activists hold a solidarity protest in support of Iddo Elam and Behar Tsalik outside the Tel Hashomer recruitment center, before they declare their refusal to enlist in the Israeli army, November 27, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

+972 met with Elam and Behar Tsalik two days before their incarceration to talk about what led them to publicly refuse, the reactions from those around them, and their preparations for spending time in prison.

Oren Ziv: What is the message you hoped to convey by refusing to enlist during wartime?

Elam: I refuse because I want a future of security, in which I will not be afraid of missiles, all-out regional war, or terror attacks; a Gazan child will not be afraid that his house will be blown up or that his entire family will be killed; a child from the West Bank will not be afraid that his father will be kidnapped [by soldiers] and he will not know where he is.

I’m also refusing so that children in the next generation don’t experience another October 7. It doesn’t make sense that there have been seven wars [in Gaza] since I was born, which Gazan children have also experienced and many of them have died in. I refuse because I believe that as long as we continue to comply with the government, the war, and this agenda of death and more death, that’s exactly what we’ll get: death and more death. We must use every tool to resist, to make it stop — including refusing and paying a personal price.

Behar Tsalik: I refuse for my future and the future of my country and its neighbors. We can’t go on like this. It’s unbearable for everyone here. We need to stop going in the same circles of bloodshed

and start working toward peace. I hope my refusal can be a means to strive for that. This is the most tangible action we can take right now to save as many lives as possible — Gazans, hostages, soldiers, fathers, and mothers; anyone we can.

How did you reach the decision to refuse?

Behar Tsalik: I had some kind of awakening shortly before I turned 16 and realized that I wouldn't serve in the military. I felt less comfortable getting an exemption through other means [e.g. for mental health reasons or pacifism], so I began researching the [Conscience Committee](#). From there, I discovered Mesarvot. I saw an interview with Einat [Gerlitz, who served 87 days in prison for [refusing the draft](#) in September 2022] and found [the anti-occupation bloc](#) at the Kaplan protests [against the Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul].

That was it — around the age of 16 or 17, I knew this was what I was going to do. And if I'm already doing this and it's important to me, then taking the step to do it publicly feels natural.

Elam: Similar to Soul, I experienced a significant political awakening around the age of 15. I'm active in left-wing political circles opposing the occupation. It was clear to me that I couldn't serve, partly because I come from a family that supports avoiding the draft, and partly because once I saw how the army treats Palestinians in the occupied territories and got to know Palestinians — both Israeli citizens and residents of the West Bank — it became evident to me that I couldn't be part of that system, both morally and in terms of my commitment to them.



A crowd of friends, family, and activists holds a solidarity protest in support of Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik outside the Tel Hashomer recruitment center, before they declare their refusal to enlist in the Israeli army, November 27, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

I considered obtaining a [mental health] exemption, but the decision to refuse came from a sense of responsibility to make it part of the struggle, a protest that would spark conversation around the occupation, the war, and conscription. I think it's critical that young people aren't sent to war without understanding what the war is about.

We currently have a government that you could call fascist-leaning, far right, aiming to ultimately [promote settlement in Gaza](#), continue settling in the West Bank, and, at the fringe, even settle in Lebanon. These actions will result in the deaths of hundreds if not thousands more Israelis, and, of course, tens of thousands more Palestinians and Lebanese. I think the media, the government, and the entire system pushing for enlistment aren't talking openly about the reality here and the war's objectives, and I feel obligated to protest and expose these truths. And I'm doing this also for the sake of Israelis: to promote a deal for the release of hostages.

Last week, the two of you sat in a park in Tel Aviv [with a sign](#) that read: “We refuse to enlist, change our minds.” What were the reactions like? And more generally, do you think it's possible to speak to other Israeli teenagers about refusal?

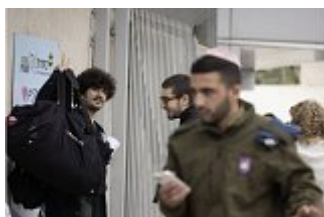
Elam: It was a very interesting experience. Not many were willing to sit down and talk with us, but

in the end, we did have a few conversations. Most of the people we spoke with disagreed with our decision to refuse. Those who supported us simply passed by and said, “Good for you.” The arguments we heard were along the lines of, “But who is there on the other side to make peace with?” “Why promote peace when they’re murdering our brothers?” and, “We need as many people as possible in the army — how can you allow yourselves to refuse?” We had discussions, and I think it is possible to talk to some people.

Before the war, the anti-occupation bloc [at the anti-government protests] was growing; sometimes, it had hundreds of people, and discussion of the occupation occasionally made it to the main stage. In September, just before the war, we at Mesarvot managed to gather 390 teenagers’ signatures on [a refusal letter](#).

But as soon as the war began, there was no one to talk to about refusal. Any attempt to discuss it led to threats or even arrests in the case of Palestinians. But now, I think there’s a renewed desire to engage in this conversation because people are realizing that the war isn’t advancing the interests of the hostages or Israelis in general.

I think the act of refusal opens a door to this discussion because it’s something you can’t ignore. Even if it upsets someone to the point where they feel they have to curse us, it’s still a starting point for a discussion about topics that can be seen as less “radical,” like the occupation or stopping the war.



Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik enter the Tel Hashomer recruitment center to declare their refusal to enlist in the Israeli army, November 27, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Behar Tsalik: Before October 7, I felt like a window had opened to talk about this, but since then, in some places, this discourse has been rejected entirely. The cracks that had formed have been filled with patriotism, revenge, and things like that. But elsewhere, the opposite has happened: people have come to understand that this isn’t sustainable.

When we sat outside and invited people to talk with us, I felt the difference that proximity makes. Online, it’s either friends of ours or people in our circles who support us, or people writing not so nice things. But when we were there in person, quite a few people passed by and quietly said, “We support you.” It’s clear they won’t refuse themselves or encourage their children to refuse, but in their hearts, and when it’s “just between us,” they can express sympathy.

I was surprised by how many such people there were. I think most of those who spoke with us were soldiers in combat roles, and they were open to dialogue. It wasn’t about convincing or being convinced, but it was a genuine and interesting conversation. The moment they saw us face-to-face, they couldn’t reduce us to “traitors” or “enemies of Israel.” They saw us as people who want to do good.

Iddo, you mentioned that getting to know Palestinians was instrumental in your decision to refuse. Is your refusal also a message to Palestinians?

Elam: When people claim there's no one to make peace with because the Palestinians hate us, I always say that as an Israeli I can only change my own society. But I want this act of refusal to resonate among Palestinians as well, so that they hear our messages and understand that we want peace. I know from conversations with Palestinian friends over the years that this is something they deeply value. I'm not doing this for them; I'm doing it for myself, but I want a continuous connection with them so they don't give up on the struggle.

My relationship with Palestinian citizens of Israel, especially those in Banki, has been very important over the past year. I believe they appreciate [my decision] and see themselves as partners in the same struggle, doing very similar things within their community to promote peace and a shared Jewish-Arab future. If I'm advocating for peace, I need to engage with those who will be part of that peace.

How were your decisions to refuse received within your families and at school, for example?

Behar Tsalik: There are people at school who don't agree with me — there were less of them before the war, and today they are the majority. But they know me, they know I want to do good.

My immediate family is very supportive. The reactions from my extended family were sometimes unpleasant. There are people in the family who know I don't intend to serve but they don't want to ask about it, and there are some who are really supportive. I think I'm privileged in that not everyone cuts off contact with me. Those who cut off contact are relatively distant, and I can tolerate it.

Elam: The immediate circle of friends I grew up with in Tel Aviv, who come from center-left families, supported my refusal even after October 7, although there were many difficult conversations about why I opposed the war already in October and November [2023]. For a government that is so fascist, the only way to bring down Hamas in its eyes is to bring down Gaza. So there were a lot of harsh conversations, shouting and heated discussions with friends, but little by little it became clearer to my close friends that they also opposed the war.



Iddo Elam and Soul Behar Tsalik say goodbye to friends and family before entering the Tel Hashomer recruitment center and declaring their refusal to enlist in the Israeli army, November 27, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

I heard from people here and there at school that I am a Hamas supporter and an antisemite, even if they only saw on my [Instagram] a message against the war. It doesn't matter that I didn't post anything in support of Hamas.

There were situations where people yelled at me as soon as I said I was refusing, even if I had only known them for five minutes. It was sometimes difficult and a little unpleasant, but on the other hand, it encouraged me to continue. Because in the end, if there are 17- or 18-year-olds who don't know me and hate me just because of my political opinions, then this discussion has to happen.

Among my family, luckily, I have support, and those who aren't supportive are still trying to be nice about it. We are naturally less in touch with the religious and extreme-right members of my family.

Were you afraid of publicly refusing and going to jail at a time when there is incitement and violence toward anyone who opposes the war?

Behar Tsalik: Yes. We are not the first refuseniks since October 7, so there are people who have faced it before us who can prepare us. We know what the public reaction is, and I think it's not all that different [to the situation before the war] — perhaps only in the number of [negative] reactions. It's a change in quantity, not quality.

Elam: The public reaction is more frightening to me than prison. Refuseniks were already being sent to prison before the war. Those who've already served time in military prison during the war told us that some people are there for not enlisting [usually for less explicitly political reasons], so there's room for discussion and some of them will understand. It is precisely the attacks by the public that have become more severe and numerous.

What tips did you get from the refuseniks who already went to prison?

Behar Tsalik: Tal [Mitnick] taught me how not to answer the question of why you're in prison if you don't want to get into a discussion with someone, if you're tired and don't have the energy.

Elam: They sent us a list of what to bring, and mainly gave us advice regarding what to say or not say and how to make people understand that you're not evil. Because even if you don't want to get into a political discussion, you should talk to people so that you aren't alone.

We had a lot of conversations with past refuseniks about things like what's going to happen in prison, what's the schedule there, what the commanders want from you, how not to anger them, how not to get put in solitary confinement or "the wing" [the part of the prison where conditions are harsher].

You won't have your phones, but you're allowed to take in a few CDs and books. What will you bring?

Behar Tsalik: I am taking Mati Caspi's "End of the Day," which is his best album. I just bought a second-hand Belle Sebastian album that a friend recommended to me, and a bit of jazz, Thelonious Monk. Books — a little politics, a lot of philosophy, Albert Camus, a short text by Chomsky, and Nietzsche.

Why a short text? Isn't prison a time for long reads?

Behar Tsalik: Because I'm addicted to Instagram so I have a short attention span. I also wanted a [book with a] plot, so I asked all sorts of refuseniks for their favorite books from incarceration, which include David Foster Wallace and a book called "The Centaur" that Oryan [Mueller] gave me, as well as "Catch-22" which I thought would be funny to read in prison.

Elam: I'm a jazz player, but I found that I don't have a lot of CDs because I collect records. With the help of a lot of my parents' friends, I'm bringing Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things," Jaco [Pastorius], [Charles] Mingus, and Miles Davis.

As for books, I also wanted to bring things that are not about politics so that I'll have fun reading them. I'm bringing Dune, a book of poems by Mahmoud Darwish in Hebrew, and Hanoch Levin, among other things. We'll see what I'll be able to finish. In the next incarceration period, I would

very much like to bring Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks."

P.S.

- +972 Magazine. October 31, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/iddo-elam-soul-behar-tsalik-israeli-military-refusal/>

- Oren Ziv is a photojournalist, reporter for Local Call, and a founding member of the Activestills photography collective.

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Oren Ziv's articles in +972 Magazine:

<https://www.972mag.com/writer/orenziv/>

- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land.

Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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