

Israeli Anti-Sharon Peace Leader Tours U.S.

by M. Woodward

On Sept. 12, Adam Keller, life-long Israeli peace activist, prominent member of Gush Shalom, author of *Terrible Days: Social Divisions and Political Paradoxes in Israel*, and editor of the quarterly *The Other Israel*, began an impassioned, 19-day tour of nine cities in North America (including Toronto), bringing a voice of reason and dialogue, which is excluded from mainstream U.S. news media: that of the Israeli citizenry which is working with Palestinians for a just, two-state solution to the ongoing crisis in Israel/Palestine. Upon accepting an invitation to speak at a three-day UN Conference on Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People, Keller offered to speak to various Jewish and coalition peace groups throughout the United States.

Keller spoke to a capacity audience on Sept. 26, at the Friends Center in Philadelphia, giving a history of his involvement with the peace camp in Israel. He was 11 when the “new territories” (now known as the “Occupied Territories” of the West Bank and Gaza Strip) were acquired during the Six-Day War in 1967. Two years later, he was doing fundraising to assist in Israel’s purchase of Phantom airplanes from the United States. He subsequently joined Knesset Member Uri Avnery’s youth movement, because of his support for separation of Israelis and Palestinians. (Octagenarian Avnery, who called for a Palestinian state during the Six-Day War, seems to grow more youthful with each paper that he writes; he has, throughout his life, been condemned by the sophists of Israel, for corrupting its youth.)

At the age of 16, Keller was greatly upset by Ariel Sharon’s put-down of an uprising in Gaza, and one night met with someone who, in cloak and dagger fashion, brought him to meet with a soldier in a basement. The soldier, who was printing leaflets that had been censored by the military, spoke to him of war crimes being committed by the army, against the Palestinians. Keller took stacks, and went through neighborhoods, placing them in people’s mailboxes.

Despite his activism for peace, Keller, recognizing the legitimate need for the self-defense of his country, was ready for his induction into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) at age 18, and was greatly disappointed that poor vision prohibited him from being trained for combat. He joked that his first act of refusal was to reject work in warehouse maintenance. However, he changed his mind when his superior explained that this was an important job, since the army could not survive without logistics.

Keller’s greatest lamentation concerns current Prime Minister Sharon. “Sharon has been there all my life,” he is “always there,” and “influential not in a good way.” Sharon, as Defense Minister, launched Operation Peace for Galilee on June 8, 1982. The auspices were that the invasion of Lebanon was necessary to stop terrorism against Israelis (in case anyone missed the point, Keller noted that the Iraq War was “familiar” to those who experienced the Lebanon War).

Birth of the Anti-War Movement

Sharon’s position was to circle Beirut, and the soldiers at the “front started getting the feeling that the government was not telling them the truth” about why they were there. After a while, the troops telephoned Peace Now, in Jerusalem, asking why they were not demonstrating. They were told, “We don’t want to demoralize the troops,” to which the soldiers responded: “We are the troops!”

And so, the anti-war movement was started in Israel. The first demonstration was 50 strong, in front of the Defense Ministry office, where many of them were beat up by police in civilian clothes. A subsequent demonstration brought out 100,000 people, causing the government enough concern that they sponsored a counter-demonstration. Keller called this “our victory,” that the government had to hold its own rally in support of itself.

In September 1982, Israelis began pouring into the streets, outraged by the massacres of Palestinians in the Lebanese refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla, by the Christian Falange, under the implicit direction of Sharon. On Dizengoff Street, in Old Tel Aviv, police were waiting, and everyone who took that route was arrested. Nonetheless, as Father of the Yiddish Renaissance I.L. Peretz’s father once told him, “They can’t put the whole world in jail,” and anti-war demonstrations continued for a week. During one, a grenade was tossed into the crowd, killing one and injuring ten.

The largest demonstration, of 400,000, caused the formation of the Kahan Commission of Inquiry into the massacres. Despite the rightists howling that the left was victimizing Sharon, he was forced to resign, and IDF Gen. Rafi Eitan was dismissed from his position.

The peace camp thought that this was the end of Sharon. But, as Keller put it, “I will know Sharon is ended when I see him in his grave. Then I will put a big rock on it.” (Jews, when we visit our loved ones at the cemetery, do not bring flowers, for cut flowers die quickly. Rocks symbolize the strength of love.) Sharon is the “great manipulator,” the manipulator of Palestinians and of settlers. Virtually every cease-fire of Palestinians is met with a convenient extra-judicial murder, leading to another suicide bombing, which is manipulated into “proof” that there is no peace partner.

Keller’s ‘Refusal’

Mandatory conscription in the IDF lasts for three years, beginning immediately after high school. After the three-

year stint, soldiers then become reservists, and spend one month every year in the military. In 1984, Keller was jailed for his first refusal, not to go to Lebanon. His commander told him that one more soldier was needed for the deployment, and if Keller refused, they would send an acquaintance, Moshe, in his place. Moshe had a young daughter, and the army gave Keller two hours to make his decision. Though he worried about Moshe constantly during his month in jail, he realized that Moshe needed also to refuse. (This psychological warfare operation by the IDF is a watered-down version of what World War II concentration camp survivor and psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim describes in one of his essays. The Nazis ordered a Jew to dig a hole, threw another Jew in, and ordered the first to bury the second alive. When he refused, the Nazis had them switch places, and the Jew who had not been buried, was so terrified that he buried the man who had not killed him.)

In 1988, Keller was a dishwasher for the post stationed in the Negev Desert. He spent “two very busy nights” writing anti-occupation slogans on 117 tanks, and in bathrooms. The military police questioned everyone, inquiring, “Do you know any leftists around here?” Keller was arrested and spent three months in jail.

He became a total refuser after a trial against four soldiers who had beaten a Palestinian to death in front of his family. The soldiers were sentenced to only nine months, and then complained that they were being victimized, and threatened to reveal the names of their commanding officers who recommended they “break the bones of Palestinians.” They were released, and Keller went, again, to military prison, for his protest.

There, he refused everything: He refused to wear a uniform, and was force-dressed. He refused to call his superiors “sir.” He went on a hunger strike, and only drank tea with sugar for two weeks.

Keller found jail a good organizing place. “Some people, when you’re months in prison, are more willing to talk to you” (many years later, one cellmate sent word to him that he was allowing Palestinians to pass through checkpoints without looking at their identification). There, he also found a “solidarity of the trouble-makers,” as when another prisoner offered to surreptitiously give Keller his food.

After two weeks, he was given a permanent psychiatric release, “mentally unfit” for military service.

Keller’s son, Uri Ya’acobi, having grown up during the occupation, never got to see the IDF as protective, only abusive, and he became a pacifist (when in school, and the teacher asked, “What does your father do in the army?” he answered, “My father is a prisoner.”)

According to Keller, “the Refusal movement is now quite flourishing.” He told his rapt audience: “We in Israel can’t vote on Nov. 2. We are counting on you to get Bush out, if for no other reason than to give an example to the world: ‘Crime doesn’t pay.’ ”