Part 3 Morality in discourse

Introduction

When people recount their experiences, when they get the opportunity to talk about what they have seen and been through, we end up with accounts. These accounts are highly individual and subjective and this is the reason they have the potential to give us an insight into how these people think; most importantly, though, they can give us insights into the specific ways people speak about their past experiences and thus the way they understand them and want us to understand them. When such experiences and the behaviour of the speaker are complex and ambiguous by nature, and especially when they involve others and thus gain a moral dimension, certain discursive strategies are used to explain or justify them.

In Chapter 6 I will look at the accounts given by Israeli soldiers of their experiences and behaviour during their service in the OPT and I will try to distil from these the dominant discursive strategies used to justify, legitimize or deny this behaviour. This will be done with the help of a theoretical framework in which such strategies are discussed and analysed.

Before getting to these strategies, however, it is important to stress from what point of view these soldiers are being looked at. As mentioned before, within the context of the OPT and the activities of Israeli soldiers, these soldiers can be defined as perpetrators. They are the ones in power after all and they are the ones who execute the acts of violence and harassment that have been discussed here. Being in this position of power, a subject that has been discussed in Part 2, gives soldiers a certain degree of freedom of action to control other people (in this case, the Palestinians) using different means of verbal or physical aggression. Their sheer presence as an occupying force is enough to create a great inequality in terms of freedom and power. This is not to say that all Israeli soldiers serving within the OPT are perpetrators of actual atrocities or crimes of war. But acts do not have to be of great importance to create a victim and hence a perpetrator. The language and discursive techniques of aggressors in general are similar and the discourses of justification, legitimization and denial are comparable. In this chapter I will, then, examine the speech of soldiers when they explain, legitimize, rationalize or deny their actions.

Looking at the actual language that soldiers use can help us understand their discursive strategies. Issues at hand will include the important repertoires that come up when soldiers explain their behaviour during their service, what dominant strategies are used and the extent to which soldiers acknowledge the suffering they witness and actively perpetrate. Only when we look at the accounts that soldiers give about their acts can we see how they distinguish between
right and wrong behaviour and what their moralities actually look like. Some of the repertoires that have been distilled out from the language of soldiers and that will be discussed here are passivity, professionalism and ideological justifications.

Finally, I will then go on to argue, in Chapter 7, that the dominant morality of Israeli soldiers is one that I shall call instrumental morality, a morality where we find strategies that consider the good of the self or the ‘in-group’ privileged over consideration for the ‘other’. I will show how this instrumental morality has three dimensions: the personal, the group and the state. Within all of these dimensions instrumentality is present in the motivation of soldiers’ actions.
Chapter 6

The discursive strategies of soldiers

It is now time to take another look at the material collected during the research to see what discursive strategies, as I shall call them, Israeli soldiers use during their service in the OPT. For this purpose, the same material that has been analysed and discussed in the previous part of this work will be re-read and re-analysed using the theoretical framework that will be discussed shortly, this framework serving as a lens through which to examine the material.

When speaking about their experiences in the OPT, Israeli soldiers give accounts of their behaviour and decision-making by explaining, legitimizing and/or justifying their actions and reactions. In this chapter, these accounts will be the focus; they will be deconstructed in order to filter out the dominant strategies Israeli soldiers use to make sense of their own actions and decision-making. As these accounts always concern others, most importantly other comrades and the Palestinian population, they become moral and, hence, we could even speak of moral strategies.

It is important to note that the themes and strategies that will be discussed are the dominant themes that were found in the soldiers’ discourses. There is a very rich range of discursive strategies and not all can be discussed here, however. For this reason, the dominant themes and strategies that were found to be reoccurring in the interviews were chosen for further exploration. Such strategies are often interconnected and combined by the speakers and can be simultaneously used in one and the same conversation.

On the surface, Israeli soldiers seem to take a passive stance towards the situation they find themselves in as soldiers serving in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and as controllers of another people. As we shall see later, utterances such as ‘There is nothing I can do’, ‘You have to do it’ and ‘You have to do your job’ are abundant in their accounts. The occupation of the Territories by the Israeli military stays relatively unquestioned by the soldiers, being taken as a given, as a situation they cannot change and within which they need to work due to factors beyond their control. Even though exceptions exist, the soldiers who did question the occupation and their role within it, continued to serve and to follow the orders given to them. Their critical opinions were given by them as civilians; as soldiers they did their job without asking too many questions or resisting the orders they received.68

68 Especially during the Lebanon War of 1982–83 this attitude of (reserve) soldiers was manifested for the first time in an explicit form; these soldiers would fight during the week and protest against the war at the weekends in demonstrations for Peace Now. This was also known as the ‘Shoot and Cry’ phenomenon. Today such activism is far away from most serving soldiers although some still have critical ideas.
Notwithstanding, the occupation and the presence of the soldiers within the OPT are accompanied by certain practices on the ground. Such practices have been discussed at length in Part 2 of this work and include manning checkpoints, patrolling villages and cities and carrying out night-time arrests. These form part of the daily practices of the soldiers and they carry consequences with them on several levels, the most important of these being for the ‘others’, the Palestinian civilians the soldiers are confronted with, and for the soldiers themselves.

These consequences for the soldiers have been discussed in Part 2 and included the processes of numbing and attrition that the soldiers went through while carrying out their tasks. Furthermore, the practices soldiers carry out bring risks with them for the soldiers’ safety; simultaneously feelings of fear can emerge.

The consequences of the practices of the Israeli military for the lives of the Palestinians are an important issue of research in themselves as they are diverse and complex – these consequences are all-encompassing in the lives of Palestinians living within the OPT (see, for example, Hammami 2006; Hammami and Tamari 2001; Bucaillle 2004; Gordon 2008). The occupation of the Territories and the activities of the Israeli soldiers within it influence the daily lives of the Palestinian population profoundly and cause suffering and hardship. As already noted in Part 2, Palestinians are, for example, forced to go through checkpoints on a daily basis and are restricted in their movements by a system of permits and ID cards issued by the Israeli military.

The manifold influences of the occupation on all parties involved along with its consequences, such as the daily hardship for the Palestinians, and also their own unsafe situation need to be dealt with by the soldiers. Decisions have to be made and actions have to be carried out. The situations they find themselves in cause dilemmas of a moral nature but can also, as will be shown later on, leave soldiers indifferent.

I shall, however, start by discussing a theoretical framework in which theories about strategies of perpetrators or bystanders feature. The literature that will be discussed deals foremost with perpetrators of and bystanders in atrocities and the subsequent human suffering. It is material that, for example, poses questions about the ability of human beings to ‘look away’ when confronted with such suffering or about the ability to perpetrate acts that cause suffering without feeling guilt. Furthermore, the material deals with justifications and legitimizations given by people for their behaviour. The main reason for using this material is that it discusses strategies and moral discourses that are used by perpetrators to justify, neutralize or deny their actions. By looking at theories dealing with mechanisms that human beings use to explain (away)

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69 For detailed reports, see organizations such as Machsom Watch and Physicians for Human Rights [www.machsomwatch.org](http://www.machsomwatch.org) and [www.phr.org.il](http://www.phr.org.il).

70 This is not to say that the consequences for both parties should be perceived as being equal. It is taken as a given that the position of the Israeli soldier is one of power on which the Palestinian citizen is dependent.
their behaviour we can hopefully understand the moralities of Israeli soldiers in the OPT in a more profound way.

6.1 Theoretical standpoints on discursive and moral strategies: conscious or unconscious

For the purposes of this theoretical framework I chose works that specifically look at accounts of people who speak about their experiences of violence and suffering. Much has been written on questions of how people can commit violence or atrocities and how horrendous events such as genocides can take place (see, for example, Bauman 1989; Staub 1989; Vetlesen 2005). Such works, however, important as they are, often lack a specific focus on the actual accounts people give and thus lack an analysis of the different ways people explain their own behaviour around suffering and violence. Such literature frequently sets out to understand the more general motivations one can find for the crimes and atrocities they deal with and they often overlook the actual mechanisms perpetrators use on a more micro level, something this study aims to do.

Other, mostly psychological, literature which focuses on explaining the reaction of people to traumatic events, such as witnessing grave suffering, often includes the works of S. and A. Freud, who both wrote about the defence mechanisms that come into play when people have to shield themselves off from something they have witnessed. These defence mechanisms were once accepted, within psychological theory, as being completely unconscious. People were believed to have internal mechanisms outside of their own control that served to block their consciousness for things that were too hard to grasp or too painful to see.

Today, more and more critical voices are heard, however, disputing the claim that these mechanisms are solely unconscious. In her work on the responses people give when confronted with human rights abuses and suffering, B. Seu warns us about this (2003). In her article she mentions psychological explanations that are used by lay people ‘to justify indifference and lack of action’ (2003: 184). Phrases such as ‘shutting off, closing down, turning away, not wanting to know’ (ibid: 183) are used as defence mechanisms against the effects such suffering could have on the person witnessing it.

More importantly, in her work she argues for an understanding of a ‘desensitized subject’ or a person who views him or herself as getting an overload of information about suffering and who, accordingly, ‘shuts off’ or is desensitized as ‘a psychological subject as well as morally agentic’ (ibid: 183). This means that explanations given by people who are confronted with the suffering of others about being desensitized, of ‘shutting off’ or of blocking the suffering out should not be taken at face value. Such explanations can easily be seen, Seu argues, as justifications for not taking action and for giving in to apathy. These people should be still seen
as agents of their own actions and not as mere ‘subjects’ under the complete control of the
effects of the suffering they have witnessed.

S. Cohen also argues that we should ask ourselves if shutting off is really as unconscious
as it is made out to be. Denial, as he calls such mechanisms, is always partial. It is usually a case of
not wanting to know anymore and of thus ‘turning a blind eye’ (2001).

Seu and Cohen’s realization that denial is partial and that a degree of consciousness is
present when denying acts is important here. It seems too easy to use psychological theories of
‘blocking out’ or ‘shielding off’ to explain the acts of soldiers. Seeing them as moral agents who
should be expected to be able to make moral decisions for themselves is an important step in
understanding soldiers’ discourse and behaviour while not losing sight of the fact that this ability,
as we saw in Chapter 5, is also severely influenced by multiple factors.

**Bandura’s moral disengagement**

To get back to psychological theory, the notion of moral reasoning has specifically been
elaborated within this discipline. One of the most famous scholars who worked on this subject
was L. Kohlberg, a follower of J. Piaget. Together with his colleagues he developed several
theories and tests to capture moral judgments and moral motivations through scales and graphs

In his own work (1991), Bandura criticizes fellow psychologists like Kohlberg who have
tackled the subject of morality only from the angle of moral thought. Questions posed by people
like Piaget (1948) and Kohlberg (1984) focus on the way the human mind works when
confronted with dilemmas, or how the human psyche makes sense of morality and moral
decision-making. Bandura especially attacks the ‘stage theory’ Kohlberg uses because, according
to him, it ignores important social factors. Stage theory tells us that there are several stages of
moral thought (six according to Kohlberg). To get to a certain stage, one has to experience the
previous ones. The stages go from ‘punishment-based obedience’ and ‘evolve through
opportunistic self-interest, approval-seeking conformity, respect for authority, contractual
legalistic observance and culminating in principles morality based on standards of justice’
(Bandura 1991: 46).

In Bandura’s view, Kohlberg’s approach is an incomplete theory of how human beings
organize their moral thoughts. His own social cognitive theory (Bandura 1991) includes social
influences to explain moral reasoning and also actual moral conduct. He furthermore criticizes
the way most stage theorists conduct their research with abstract moral situations that do not
(correspond to actual, real-life situations in which people are confronted with real moral issues.
The focus of Bandura is on the capacity of people to refrain from amoral behaviour (moral agency) and on the ‘psychological manoeuvres by which moral self-sanctions are … disengaged from inhumane conduct’ (1999: 193) – moral disengagement. He places these issues within their social surroundings and thus claims to look at actual conduct instead of abstract situations.

Bandura’s moral disengagement is a ‘cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign and or worthy one’ (2002: 101) through several different mechanisms. Each of these mechanisms has as its goal to disengage oneself from self-sanctions, which we all have. Our self-sanctions, in general, keep our conduct in line with our internal standards, our values and morality. If we, through various mechanisms that will be discussed here, disengage from these self-sanctions, we are able to behave in ways that are different from what our internal values prescribe. This behaviour has a potential to be immoral and even violent.

As a psychologist, Bandura focuses on cognitive processes and he does not, therefore, give examples of the actual speech people use. His theory, however, involves strategies that feature in the accounts people give which can thus be seen as discursive strategies. He, however, does not analyse speech as such but rather theorizes about more general categories that can be used when analysing this.

Missing in Bandura’s work is, furthermore, the influence external circumstances can have on people’s conduct. Even though he breaks away from the work of Kohlberg (which does not take social circumstances into consideration) he could take this issue further himself. In this study, for example, we saw how feelings of boredom, frustration and attrition can have a profound influence on the way people, soldiers in this case, behave and make sense of their own behaviour and thus on the discursive and moral strategies they use.

The reason why his work is still important and helpful here is due to the fact that Bandura points out central themes that could help us recognize strategies in the speech of soldiers. He identifies several ways that people disengage from their behaviour and these are very useful for further analysis.

Cohen’s states of denial

Although Cohen (2001) is also concerned with strategies used when explaining immoral behaviour, he looks at this subject from a sociological point of view. More so than Bandura, he looks at the actual behaviour and speech of people and gives ample examples of these in his work. He, furthermore, dedicates space to the issue of bystanders; people who witness suffering
and atrocities and their own actions or inaction. He thus connects his theory to real-life situations that are recognizable for most.

Cohen writes about the different states of denial human beings find themselves in or, better yet, create for themselves (2001). These states of denial can take place on a personal level but also on a political level and even on the level of a whole state or society. For our purposes, personal denial is the most interesting form as we are looking at soldiers’ discourses. However, as we shall see, soldiers at times adopt official or ideological language that is commonly used by institutions of the state.

What Cohen wants to find out is the way we are able to look away, be indifferent or stay silent in the face of suffering and atrocities. How can we know about such suffering and then claim not to know or, if we admit to knowing about it, not act upon this knowledge? In his work, Cohen identifies different methods of denial that people and states make use of, which can help us understand the language of justification, rationalization and normalization on a deeper level.

In Cohen’s eyes ‘statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about’ (2001: 3). However, to act in denial could also be seen as ‘the need to be innocent of a troubling recognition’ (ibid: 33). This means that we choose or want (in some way consciously) to stay in the dark about a fact or happening that is difficult to see or hear about and that could, were we to know about it, force us into some kind of action. His interpretation of denial is a broad one, from literal denial (denying any knowledge about something) to ‘implicatory’ denial (denial of the implications a certain act has, the act as such not being denied here).

**Perpetrators’ accounts**

Important for us here is the realization that the speech acts of offenders can be seen and analysed as accounts. Within these speech acts, the offender or bystander addresses accountability for the actions perpetrated or witnessed. This then becomes, Cohen asserts, a form of moral accounting (2001: 59).

These accounts are products of the social environment in which they are formed. This means that such accounts are not private and particular but part of a shared discourse. In different social settings, different accounts of the same events can be given, this pointing to the deep social character such accounts have.

As I am dealing with soldiers’ explanations about their behaviour and their motivations for it, the realization that their accounts are social and influenced by their surroundings is very important. Because accounts are ‘embedded in popular culture, banal language codes and state-
encouraged legitimations’ (ibid: 76), keeping the background of the Israeli soldiers in mind is imperative.

Cohen divides accounts into two categories: justifications and excuses. Users of the first category of accounts admit that an act was committed but refuse to see it as wrong. Such accounts are often ideological, aggressive and unapologetic (2001: 59). Excuses try to neutralize and normalize the acts committed; they admit the wrongness of an act but add that they ‘had to do it’ or that they ‘didn’t have a choice’ (ibid.). As we shall see here, both categories will be found in the discourse of Israeli soldiers serving within the OPT.

The work of Bandura and Cohen, then, will not be used here for the purposes of a theoretical discussion but it will be used as a framework within which we can understand the way soldiers use moral strategies. This framework will then be used to make sense of the accounts of Israeli soldiers and the strategies they utilize.

Soldiers’ talk.

Seu argues that the (psychological) explanations given by people and the discourse they use around the confrontation with the suffering of others can be seen as constructions of accounts and justifications (2003). The ‘talk’ of people should be seen as a form of social action and, as such, explanations given by people are very important when trying to understand human behaviour. The fact that Seu takes theories from critical discursive psychology as her framework is of interest because critical psychologists ‘are much more interested in the way people construct and reconstruct the world and their subjectivity in everyday talk’ (2003: 190), an approach I would like to use here.

Seu’s ideas about how to look at people’s daily explanations and her use of psychological theories are useful when looking at the discourse of Israeli soldiers in the field. The ‘talk’ of the soldiers should indeed be seen as a site for constructing accounts and hence the importance of investigating the way they talk, explain and justify their actions and behaviour. Looking at the way discourse is constructed and not only at the message of the speaker is what is important here.

Moreover, it is important to pay attention to the ‘agentic’ role a soldier gives himself within the account of his experiences. As we shall see shortly, many Israeli soldiers do not use the ‘I’ form but the passive ‘you’ when they are talking about their own personal experiences. For instance, a soldier will say ‘and then you go into that house’ instead of ‘and then I went into that house’. The use of a passive agent is important in the way it creates distance between the actual action and the agent himself. Bandura even warns about the use of the ‘agentless passive voice’

71 With thanks to Avichay Sharon of Breaking the Silence who pointed this out to me.
(2002: 105) according to which acts are carried out by nameless forces such as when ‘the truck drove into the crowd’. The driver of the truck remains absent and thus innocent here.

In I. Maoz’ work on the first Intifada, she makes a distinction between ‘ambivalents’ and ‘legitimizers’ when talking about the mechanisms soldiers use during a-symmetrical encounters with Palestinian civilians (2001). Soldiers in the first category were, thus, ambivalent about the use of force in clashes with Palestinians while the latter group legitimized it. In this study a similar tendency was found. Although most interviewees fell within the ambivalent category there were, however, as we shall see, also soldiers who legitimized their violent activities towards Palestinians and who did not admit any ambivalence.

Before looking at the strategies of soldiers more closely, I would like to start with the analysis of a unique piece of data that can give us an unusual, intimate look into the daily reasoning of Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint in the OPT.

Filming at the checkpoint: a rare insight into the reasoning of Israeli soldiers

After many negative reports about the behaviour of Israeli soldiers at checkpoints in the OPT, the IDF made an effort, some years ago, to change the worsening image of its troops in the eyes of the international community and possibly also for national purposes. To this end it sent a team of soldiers from the IDF’s Educational Corps to one of the busiest checkpoints in the OPT, the Hawara checkpoint, to interview and film the soldiers working there in order to show the world that the situation was not as bad as the press and human rights organizations made it out to be.

This film yielded some very controversial insights into the way Israeli soldiers think about their work at the checkpoints and about the ways they explain their behaviour. In the film soldiers are seen beating Palestinians and using aggressive behaviour and verbal abuse towards people waiting to get through the checkpoint. The IDF, naturally, could not use this material for its PR purposes and the film was kept out of the public eye until a soldier decided to leak the film in 2004 to make the behaviour of the soldiers filmed at Hawara checkpoint public.

One of the main reasons for this material being so insightful is the fact that the soldiers filmed explain their behaviour and actions to other soldiers, to people like themselves and not to an outsider like a journalist or a researcher. Their openness about their violent behaviour gives us an extra degree of insight into their reasoning that is rarely found.

The checkpoint and the soldiers working there are filmed up close and the soldiers are asked questions about what they do and why. The first aspect of the material that sets the scene is the shouting of the soldiers at the Palestinians, who are practically non-vocal. The soldiers shout

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72 With much gratitude to the members of Breaking the Silence who made this material available to me.
to get people in line, to get them to move back or forward and to show their permits. A dominant theme that immediately becomes apparent is the order the soldiers are trying to create at the checkpoint. They seem to be in a constant struggle against the chaos of dozens of people trying to pass through.

This struggle for order is also one of the main explanations the soldiers give for their vocal, but later also physical, aggression towards the Palestinians who want to cross to the other side of the checkpoint. Explanations given by the soldiers are, for example: ‘They [the Palestinians] have to be afraid, otherwise there will be chaos [balagan]’; ‘They have to be afraid otherwise they will do whatever they want’; ‘They need to know who is in charge’; and ‘We have to show our presence’. One soldier even states that the area of the checkpoint (the part where the soldiers stand) needs to be ‘sterile’, by which he means empty of people apart from the soldiers, making it more orderly and thus safer. The Palestinians need, therefore, to be held at a safe distance. This use of concepts mostly employed in a medical context gives a hint of the professionalism strategy that will be discussed later.

The examples given above are all explanations and mostly justifications for the shouts and impatient hand gestures that the soldiers use to create order at the checkpoint. The soldiers, in their own view, need to act aggressively to create a certain atmosphere of fear and order in order to carry out their work. Questions concerning the morality of their own presence in the OPT and hence the presence of the checkpoint are not posed by the soldiers being interviewed nor by their interviewers.

At a certain point during the 16-minute-long footage, one of the soldiers hits a Palestinian before quickly taking him to a place out of sight. He later explains his actions in front of the camera: in his opinion what happened was that he used his own judgement, feeling, as he did, that this person (a Palestinian man who came to the checkpoint with his wife and children) was suspicious; as such he thought his actions were legitimate without specifying why he felt this. By hitting the man he also made sure that others would not dare to act in a deviant manner and that they would wait patiently in line. By taking him aside and (obviously) hitting him out of sight, he was, apparently, doing the decent thing because, as he says, ‘they don’t mind the hitting, but they care about the loss of face’. After being asked if he was sorry for what he had done and if the way he acted would have been different had he been less stressed or frustrated, the soldier admitted that he might have acted otherwise and that some of the aggressive behaviour of the soldiers is instigated by stress (atsu’im).73

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73 Literally: nerves.
More than once, the soldiers interviewed emphasized the difficulties they faced while doing their job. Some soldiers, they said, come out of service damaged (srutim)\(^1\) and they face a lot of stress. In addition, the issue of the humanity of the soldiers themselves became apparent when one of the soldiers stated: ‘sometimes you have to do your best to show yourself you are still human, this is a process on its own’. What these soldiers emphasize is the centrality of their own vulnerability as human beings in the face of the harsh work they perform at the checkpoint and the difficulties they face, without consideration for the humanity of the Palestinians they encounter.

These confused notions of what is good and bad can be found in many of the interviews with the soldiers, as we shall see. The reasoning of the soldiers in this film was very insightful in terms of how they justified and explained their activities vis-à-vis the Palestinian population in the OPT and they give us a preview of the strategies to be discussed in this section.

6.2 The minimization of moral agency

As mentioned before, from initial conversations with soldiers a sense of ‘accepting passivity’ or a lack of agency was noticed when they spoke about their presence and activities in the OPT. They took the occupation of the OPT by the IDF as a given and no questions were asked relating to reasons or explanations concerning the often unclear situations they found themselves in. Even when the suffering and hardship of Palestinians that they witnessed were recognized as such, they did not generate any kind of responsive action. This passive stance could be called a minimization of their agentive role (Bandura 2002: 106), meaning that distance is taken from the suffering that is witnessed and responsibility is evaded or displaced (ibid.). The themes related to such a stance are: inaction, apathy, indifference and feelings of helplessness, all of which feature in the discourse of the soldiers. Besides being insensitive or indifferent to the suffering of others, a lack of agency could also mean a sense of being unable to do something while still acknowledging the pain of others.

‘Ma la’asot’ (What can you do?) or ‘Ein ma la’asot’ (There is nothing you can do)

‘In the [Gaza] strip it’s also intensive.’ (Q: ‘What did you do?’) ‘[Worked on D9 (bulldozer)] we were in the area of Netzarim, at the entrance of Netzarim. There was shootings and explosives on buses; 200m from the road they cleared everything. Houses, groves, everything. Except for one mosque, they didn’t touch it. It was like a flat plate. So we took down houses and olive trees.’ (Q: ‘How did you feel?’) ‘You

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\(^1\) Literally: scratched.
know for an Arab what is important is first of all his olive trees. After that come his wife and the house. Its not nice, I started to work with gardening, so it's not nice, but we had to do it, what can you do. It would happen anyway.’ (Q: ‘Did you meet with the civilians who owned the land?’) ‘Yes for sure, there were families hanging in the trees. Children in the trees, they wouldn’t come down. Then infantry soldiers would come and shoot teargas at them, they would get them out of there and then you take down the trees. Or also in buildings, you give the house a blow with the tractor, you shake the house, they come outside and then you destroy the house.’ (13, emphasis added)

In the language Israeli soldiers use, ‘Ein ma la’asot or ‘Ma la’asot (‘There is nothing you can do/ What can you do?’) is a frequently recurring theme. Soldiers use it especially when confronted with situations they see as problematic or painful, such as those involving the suffering of Palestinian civilians whose houses they invade or whose groves they destroy, as seen in the quote above. Often such phrases are added after a description of an operation in which civilians were involved. The soldier then typically talks about the operation he participated in in an unemotional manner, adds information about the civilians that were present, for example a family in a house that was entered at night for a search, and finishes with the sentence: ‘There is nothing you can do’. In such accounts, where activities are carried out in groups, the division of tasks diffuses responsibility. Attention is given by the speaker to the factual details of the operation and not so much to its meaning and actual consequences (Bandura 2002: 107).

When we look more closely at the moral strategy that is used here, then, we can firstly see that the soldier acknowledges the suffering of the others, or at least their discomfort. Then, however, he goes on to state that this is out of his hands; the work has to be done and as such it is morally justified (Bandura 2002). That there is some suffering involved seems unavoidable. As Michael says in the above quote: ‘It would happen anyway’. This strategy is a typical example of what Cohen calls ‘implicatory’ denial. As mentioned before, within this type of denial the general interpretation of an act is acknowledged but responsibility for it is not taken. Its moral implications are interpreted as unimportant, untrue or exaggerated.

In the following example, Liron, a kibbutz member from the centre of the country who served in the Nahal 50 Battalion and who was trained as a sniper, talks about his experiences at

75 Michael explained in this interview how he took up gardening as a hobby, thus allowing him to understand the connection of the Palestinians to their groves and trees more deeply.
76 The Nahal 50 Battalion traditionally consists of members of kibbutzim and moshavim, small agricultural settlements generally with a more leftist political outlook. Members have the reputation of behaving in a more moral way towards Palestinians.
checkpoints in the OPT. From this quote we can conclude that he feels strongly that checkpoints exist for a good reason, even though the work linked to them was not always easy:

“There, you really feel you have to be there. You check trucks and cars and what can you do, they are all potentials.77 So we check the car, we don’t turn everything upside down, check it like we supposed to, I really don’t remember something happened in instances like that. It’s not like you take this guy into an alley and beat him up. You don’t do things like that, there is always a reason … you do what you have to and let the guy go. In Bethlehem and Hebron, sometimes there were sudden checkpoints that we put up and we had to stop people, also in the entrance to Jerusalem. There was a taxi that passed and there was a woman that had a miscarriage and they took the foetus with them to bury in the village, and one of my friends had to check the box. These are instances that there is nothing you can do.’ (12)

Liron emphasizes that he and his comrades were never brutal ‘for no reason’; if they were forceful it meant they had a reason to be. He senses the difficulty of the situation when a soldier has to stop a woman at the checkpoint with her lifeless child in order to check her. However, it is clear from his words that he feels that the inspections these Palestinians are subjected to are justified, difficult as they may be for the Palestinians and even for the soldiers. Again, we come upon a form of moral disengagement, as Bandura calls it, in the form of moral justification within which the role of the perpetrator in the harm caused is minimized and ‘pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable’ (2002: 103).

When Nir, another kibbutz member who served in the Nahal 50 Battalion, talks about working in a so called ‘straw widow’, he describes the situation as difficult for the soldiers from a few different perspectives. But, he adds, ‘the situation made it necessary’, in other words there was nothing else he and his comrades could do, the situation they were in made it impossible for them to act otherwise:

‘It was hard, it wasn’t easy, from a mental perspective, from a physical perspective, and also if you sleep in a house with all your things on you, you don’t sleep well. You spend a few hours there and then you go back into the field, that’s hard. But the situation made it necessary it was like, there is nothing you can do [ein ma la’asot], this

77 By ‘potentials’ this soldier means possible terrorists – the passers-by could all potentially be suicide bombers or they could be aiding a terrorist attack.
is the necessity, the situation, we need it. It’s either us or them at the moment. It’s the black and white, either us or them, there aren’t a lot of options.’(14)

Using sentences like ‘There is nothing you can do’ or ‘What can I do?’ seems to indicate the feeling the soldiers have that the situation is out of their hands; they cannot change it in any way. This feeling can, of course, indicate a real lack of power to change a certain situation but it can also be imagined or evoked by the soldiers in an effort to distance themselves from the taking of any responsibility. In the perception of the soldiers, the situation is acknowledged and the suffering or hardship involved is not denied. However, the situation comes from a necessity (such as security considerations) and as such their actions within it are perceived to be justified. The theme of self defence is also used here (‘It’s either them or us’) which enhances the feeling of the soldiers that they have no other choice but to act as they do. It is very clear that the soldiers take no responsibility whatsoever for their actions or the situations they find themselves in. Again, a case of implicatory denial (Cohen 2001) is at play; suffering and the activities causing it are acknowledged but responsibility is not taken. A clear lack of agency, from the soldiers’ point of view, is presented.

In both quotes it also becomes clear that, while acknowledging the suffering or the difficult situation of the Palestinians, the real difficulty the soldiers speak of is the difficulty they themselves have as witnesses or as reluctant instigators of this suffering. Here, part of the blame for having to perpetrate harmful activities is, surprisingly, given to the victims. Because of their presence as a generalized entity, as Palestinians, as ‘the other’, the soldiers have to do what they do (Bandura 2002: 110).

‘Lo na’im’ (Not nice)
Often the phrase ‘It’s not nice’ (the expression ‘Lo na’im’) is added to phrases like ‘There is nothing you can do’. This expression is used as in: ‘It’s not nice, but there is nothing you can do’. The theme of ‘Lo na’im’ demonstrates an acknowledgement on the part of the soldier of the suffering or hardship he has caused or witnessed. However, followed by ‘Ein ma la’asot’ (What can you do) this acknowledgment stands on its own with the soldier using the expression taking no responsibility for the situation. Furthermore, we should not confuse this for a sign of guilt or remorse. It is more a statement of acknowledgment and a subsequent acceptance of the situation as it is.

The concept of ‘Lo na’im’ also conveys the reluctance of soldiers to do the work they have to do. They are not proud of their work (earlier labelled as ‘dirty work’ (Hughes 1958)), work that
society and often the workers themselves identify as being less worthy than other work because it literally involves dirt or because of its moral taint. Carrying out activities that are ‘Not nice’ within the military context certainly fulfils the criteria for being dirty work.

However, the hardship or suffering witnessed or caused seems merely a necessary evil within this dirty work that the soldiers have to carry out. In the following quote Offer, a former soldier from a naval commando unit, expresses his opinion on the humaneness of the IDF. He acknowledges that the operations carried out by the Israeli military are hard for the Palestinian population (or ‘not nice’, as he phrases it) but, all in all, he wants to make it clear that the Israeli military is a very humane military, too humane even, a clear case of implicatory denial (Cohen 2001):

‘We, I don’t know about other units, we are humane, and even too humane. We treat them … I believe the whole military works like that. And no one comes and shoots at children, and not at women and old people and also men that … like you don’t like a guy and you shoot his foot to shut him up. There is no such thing. Women and children, we even don’t bind their hands or eyes. To the old people we give a chair, so they can sit outside. Of course it’s not a nice thing, imagine someone coming to your house and saying go outside and they search your house. I understand the population that doesn’t like it [lo na’im la], and of course they don’t understand me that I don’t want a terrorist to blow himself up in my house tomorrow or in Tel Aviv. But that is the “best of two evils” I have to do it. So we tell them to get out outside, we tell them to take their shirt up, to lower their pants, not like in a humiliating way, but because there were instances of suicide bombers. And also women and also like you saw on television probably, a child of 15 with explosives. We also don’t tell them to take their underwear off or anything, only the pants. Even though I have heard they have made underwear with explosives…So on one side it’s not nice [lo jafe] and I think we are humane anyway, we could also say “take down your pants and underwear” and also to women and humiliate them completely. But we don’t do such a thing.’ (15)

Offer is clearly what Maoz has termed a ‘legitimiser’ (2001), someone who justifies violent behaviour towards Palestinians and who denies illegal violent actions by the IDF. What is made apparent from this example is a feeling of ‘It could be worse’, in the sense that the soldiers acknowledge the fact that their actions are harmful to others but not nearly as harmful as others’
actions. This strategy is related to what Bandura calls advantageous comparison where the way ‘behaviour is viewed is coloured by what it is compared against’ (2002: 105). When you contrast your actions with other, much more severe, actions, your actions will not look as bad. In this case, the behaviour of the soldiers is compared with how they could have behaved.

In the following example, Omer, who served in an elite paratrooper unit and who grew up in a kibbutz, gives another good example of soldiers’ reasoning around the operations they carry out and the hardship they witness. He relates his experiences of arrest operations during which women and children were present:

‘You don’t have too many tools to calm them down, if you say “calm down” so they won’t do something drastic, there is nothing you can do, we are taking her son, it can be that he is a criminal or something like that. You have to take him. You don’t have a choice. Those are situations that aren’t nice [lo neimim], the mothers sometimes go crazy. That’s not nice at all. But we try to calm them down, as much as you can.’ (16)

Again a feeling of a lack of choice is apparent; Omer, who uses a passive tense, sees the difficult situation this mother is in; however, he feels his actions are out of his hands for security reasons (the person could be a criminal). While the suffering of the Palestinians involved is emphasized, his own actions are legitimized. The main strategy at play is moral justification as Omer uses the security theme to legitimize his actions (Bandura 2002).

It could even be possible that the very act of acknowledging such suffering helps soldiers in their efforts to legitimize their own and their comrades’ actions for the outside world and their own self-image. When they recognize the suffering of the ‘other’, this at least makes them human beings (or humane) even if they are the ones inflicting this suffering. The language of soldiers seems to be filled with oppositions such as ‘its not nice, but we have to do it’ which, in fact, direct the issue of responsibility away from the soldiers and puts them in a relatively positive light, since they at least acknowledge the hardship they cause.

Yariv, who as we saw earlier claims to have more leftist ideas than most other soldiers, tells of how during specific activities that he perceived to be particularly superfluous or unfair, he wanted to be present in order to carry them out in a ‘good manner’ or in his words ‘with a smile’:

“That is let’s say to walk in their market or on the main road and to stop people, just people that seem suspicious to you, and ask them where they are going and what they are doing. And that’s it, here I think it’s most important to show, to do it with a
smile and to do it…’ (Q: ‘So it was important for you to be there?’) ‘Yes that was always important to me to be there to be in charge of … that was also something that wasn’t nice to do. And in my opinion also something that is superfluous, but okay, what can I do.’ (25)

Different to the other soldiers quoted above, Yariv admits that he perceives activities such as randomly stopping and checking people on the streets to be superfluous and unnecessary. However, standing firmly within the military framework, he uses a form of implicatory denial when he adds ‘What can I do?’ to indicate that in his view he has no other choice but to follow the orders given to him by his superiors. The only thing he could do, as a minor form of ‘resistance’, was to be present, behave properly and have his soldiers do the same.

Indifference

Up until now, almost all the examples given showed soldiers who in some way or another were troubled by the suffering they witnessed, even if they legitimized it. However, what we can also find are soldiers who are indifferent to any hardship or distress felt by the Palestinian population. In the following example from a testimony collected by Breaking the Silence, a soldier explains how his service in Hebron was marked by orders which he would execute without asking questions:

‘I admit that Hebron is not divisible into periods, for me, it’s like one long line. As far as I was concerned, I wasn’t sensitive enough to it at the time, to when curfews were imposed, when curfews were lifted. It only affected me when I would go on guard-duty. All I knew was that before going on guard-duty … I’d ask: is there a curfew? Is there no curfew? There’s a curfew? Cool, I’ll enforce it. No curfew? Cool, be on your way. Most of the time there was a curfew.’ (BS Hebron)

This indifference does not mean that the soldier was not sensitive in any way to the situation of the Palestinians who were affected by the curfews he mentioned but rather that he chose not to be concerned with it and to just literally follow the rules. Here we see a form of numbing which has already been discussed in Part 2, a numbing that results in sheer detachment and indifference.

Cohen adds another facet to the notion of indifference; when one does not fully realize the immorality of one’s actions, this also falls under indifference. The acts someone performs are
then neutralized and normalized because everyone is doing it, without having any other (ideological) motives (2001: 100).

On a different level, a sense of indifference can also come from a bigger entity than one soldier or a unit. As Cohen shows us, when a whole society uses collective denial and activities are thus performed within a moral vacuum, there is no possibility of seeing that one’s actions are morally wrong (2001: 10–11). In the case of the Israeli military this is an important point as many of the activities of the soldiers are legitimized under the cover of ‘security’. By a (self-chosen) lack of deep knowledge of the situation these activities are, furthermore, often approved by the Israeli public. Israeli soldiers, then, find themselves in a situation within which, because of normalization, they cannot (or only with very great difficulty) make out if their actions are morally wrong or not.

The strategies covered by the theme of the minimization of moral agency such as implicatory denial, moral justification, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility are, thus, from one point of view characterized by acknowledgement of the difficulties Palestinian civilians go through on a daily basis as a result of the Israeli occupation of the OPT and the operations of the IDF. From another point of view, however, there is a deep passive acceptance of the situation as it is, no responsibility is taken and no change is pursued. This acceptance, combined with a feeling of being unable to change the situation can be based on the positioning of the soldiers within a hierarchical situation with not much room for manoeuvre. However, it is also used by soldiers to divert responsibility away from themselves. For when you are in a situation you are unable to change, as they argue they are, even if you want to, you can hardly be taken to be responsible for it. Furthermore, the perception of the soldiers (and often the whole society) that their activities are legitimate and necessary for the greater good (security of the state) also contributes to the diversion of responsibility elsewhere.

6.3 Professionalism (*miktsoayut*)

(Q: ‘Would there be talk about political ideas among the soldiers?’) ‘Not so much, more also, there are different opinions, that’s obvious, but the moment the operation starts everyone forgets everything, everyone knows that you have to do exactly what is needed, you don’t take it into the operations, you try not to deal with it, you know that you will do what you need to do. Also if it goes against your opinions.’ (23)
Using a discourse of professionalism to explain their behaviour comes very naturally to soldiers. Within the theme of professionalism are grouped many sub-themes that are also used by them to explain their behaviour or to make sense of it. Besides using the actual term for professionalism, ‘miktsaogut’, soldiers use many related terms while explaining their actions and decision-making in the field. I will make a distinction between two different levels in soldiers’ discourse within which the overarching theme of professionalism is used. The first one is the ‘bottom-up’ approach that a soldier uses when talking about and explaining in his own words his direct behaviour and surroundings. The second level entails a more strategic discourse used by soldiers, but more often by their commanders, within which more general and strategic considerations are made.

The reason for this division is that soldiers, even after their discharge, have a tendency to ‘slip back’ into the military or strategic discourse that they used during their years of service and which is much more impersonal then their ‘normal’ discourse. Instead of taking such a strategic discourse to be unauthentic or the opposite (taking the daily talk of soldiers as unreliable), I think it is important to look at both in terms of their own value. When an interviewee suddenly changes the tone of his speech and begins to speak in professional terms about an operation that he participated in, it teaches us a lot about the role such discourse plays in the world of thought of this interviewee. When being asked questions about his service, his memory is directed back to that period and, with this, his language can change.

Instead of treating both levels simultaneously, they have been divided into two levels in order to emphasize their difference. We should not forget, however, that soldiers could use both levels simultaneously in the same conversation or even the same sentence and that the division made is, thus, purely for reasons of clarification.

**Bottom-up: soldiers’ talk**

The type of speech that is referred to here could also be called a layman’s perception of the activities that soldiers perform in the OPT. Furnham defines this term (which he developed within several contexts, such as psychology, medicine, and economics) as ‘implicit, informal, “non-scientific” explanations’ of ‘certain behavioural phenomena’ (1988: 1). While this approach is actually used in most parts of this research, it is important to emphasize it explicitly here when we compare it to the more strategic language used by soldiers.
In the discourse of soldiers, their perception of their activities as ‘a job’ is striking. This, first of all, tells us a lot about the status that they give their work and, secondly, it naturalizes their military activities. The activities of the soldiers become ordinary performances without extraordinary meanings. Furthermore, perceiving military work as just a job can point to the use of a discourse of professionalism as a legitimizing factor. When in this frame of mind, then, the work the soldier performs is a job he has to do without having any real say in the matter. To use Cohen’s work again, such a strategy could be called a form of interpretative denial, where the facts are acknowledged but their meaning is neutralized, a strategy also established before under the notion of indifference.

In addition, a clear displacement of responsibility is at play as the job is usually done to respond to an order given by someone else, someone who should then take responsibility for its consequences. To illustrate the use of the idea of ‘It’s a job’ I will give a few examples of how it is used:

‘I’m a person who wants to be professional, I’m not there to make peace, I’m there to do my job. So if someone wants to pass the checkpoint and he’s not supposed to pass there and he has 3 boxes of cigarettes, I could professionally say I won’t check all the boxes one by one. But I want to make a statement, so I let this guy sit for an hour and a half and I check every box, because explosives can be found in anything and show him I’m not playing games. We check everything and that through this checkpoint no terrorist will go through, here there will be no mistakes. They can go through another section but here it won’t happen. So people come with vegetables and we search all the coconuts and through all the lettuce, to make sure a tomato is a tomato.’ (7)

Golan explicitly uses the actual term of professionalism in this example. As a commander in the artillery, he sees himself as a professional and speaks in terms of ‘doing his job’ and ‘not making peace’, making clear he is there to carry out his mission as given to him by decision-makers above him. Golan was proud of being very thorough in his work, proud to the point that his soldiers complained to him about it. He aimed to be a professional and this meant focusing on his mission; making sure that his checkpoint would deter terrorists from attempting to cross it while simultaneously setting an example for his soldiers.
When asked if any explanation was given to the soldiers for the situation in the Territories during the beginning of the second Intifada, Haggai, who served in Nahal 50, indicated that the explanation given was the following:

‘This is the situation, this is what we have to do, and there is no political explanation. A platoon commander comes and does his job and the soldiers the same.’ (8)

In short, the reasoning used by Haggai’s supervisors was also that there is a job to do and that this is all that needs to be known. Their message was that the soldiers should not look at the political side of what they are doing; they, as soldiers, should follow their orders, do their work and nothing more. This clearly facilitates a distance between the soldier and the consequences that his activities have. The situation is simplified for the soldiers, being diminished to ‘just performing the job’, diffusing responsibility for the consequences and decision-making concerning this job to the upper echelons. It is another example of implicatory denial as defined by Cohen (2001).

Reminiscing about his service as a D9 (big bulldozer) operator in the Gaza Strip, Michael remembers his initial reluctance to do this work. After destroying the first house, however, the work became easier, ‘just another job’ without any room for deliberation:

‘What, I’m going to destroy someone’s house? After that, a house, another house, another house.’ (Q: ‘And afterwards?’) ‘It is work, you have to do it. If everyone would think and do whatever he wanted…’ (13)

Bandura indicates how moral disengagement is often not a direct process but rather something that evolves in steps. After the first act, it becomes easier to take the next step and to then perform even more serious acts without one’s moral self-censure acting as an effective break (2002: 110). The example above shows this clearly.

When it comes to communication with outsiders (for example, Palestinians, reporters or activists) about certain military activities, Nir is very clear:

‘We come and do our jobs, there is no use in talking to them, there are very clear things we have to do, there is no use in discussing things.’ (14)

Elsewhere he says:
‘We want to do our job, questions and stuff can go to the government, to the one who is responsible, we are not … not with us. I’m not a minister or … I don’t have any decision, I execute [orders].’ (14)

When there is a job to do, Nir seems to say, there is no benefit in discussing or explaining; a job has to be done and that is all there is to it. Questions can go ‘up’ to the ones who are responsible; he himself is not responsible for the actions he is carrying out. Golan gives the same sort of explanation: he distances himself from the decision-makers of the state and, thus, from taking responsibility:

‘Like a checkpoint, it annoys the population and then you need more checkpoints, but in the end this is the military’s job, so it is with the state then, but I’m not with the state, I’m in the military. So the sergeant, 19-years-old, has to understand the state’s decision.’ (7)

In short, when using phrases such as ‘I’m just doing my job’ or ‘It’s a job’, Israeli soldiers use a professional discourse that describes their military activities as ‘normal’ jobs. This normalization, furthermore, gives them the opportunity to distance themselves from the activities they carry out. When someone says he is ‘just doing his job’ in this context, the performer does not seem to take responsibility for this job and the way it is carried out; people higher up gave him the orders and hence he is not the one who should be held responsible or who should even be obliged to explain his actions.

Using such a professionalized discourse, as we shall see further on, makes military activities more detached and less personal. Responsibility for action and its consequences is displaced and its meanings are neutralized. A job has to be carried out and the associated factors, such as the suffering or hardship of the people involved (for example, a family that is woken up in the middle of the night or a truck driver who has to wait for hours with his truck at a checkpoint) cannot be considered; these are, at most, a ‘necessary evil’.

‘As good as possible’

Equally as interesting as seeing one’s military work as just a job is the goal of soldiers to do this job as ‘well as they can’. This fits neatly within the professional discourse that is discussed here:
the job has to be done smoothly, as fast and thoroughly as possible. As noticed before, this means maintaining order at the checkpoint, having as little contact with Palestinians civilians as possible and adopting a professional attitude as a soldier. While having a distinct professional character, there is also a moral element to these explanations. The behaviour of soldiers should also be as good as possible and, thus, as humane as possible. This latter characterization will be the focus here. Bandura calls this a form of inhibitive moral agency which means ‘the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely’, as opposed to proactive agency which means the ‘power to behave humanely’ (2002: 111). Both notions can help us understand the meaning of trying to behave as well as one can while not actually adjusting one’s activities in order to behave in a more moral manner.

Omer, who served in an elite unit of the paratroopers, gives a good example of this notion when he speaks of the preparation he and his comrades received before performing arrest operations. He does not speak about changing the way the work is done, merely about how he can refrain from behaving in a bad or immoral way while doing his usual job:

‘Specific for an operation then they tell you how to treat people, not to do things that aren’t allowed, to behave good, all the purity of arms and things like that they go through it a lot because a lot of times you get in a situation where you have to use your weapon, and point at people, all the time they say to use as little force as possible, only when there is danger and then not overuse it. A weapon for example is something that you’re not allowed to use at all, not to shoot in the air, only if you have to.’ (16)

In the following quote, Omer emphasizes how an operation that is carried out should ‘look good’ in the eyes of others. He does not specify who these others are and who will judge the soldiers afterwards, though; they could be the outside world in general, the media or the public, for example. It is clear, however, that ‘looks’ are important for soldiers and the military in general. We could call this the importance of an external ‘gaze’; of the power and control observers have on performers within a certain arena, for example a checkpoint. I will come back to this in the following chapter.

‘Because in the end that is the professional, in an arrest that’s how they will see us afterwards, in the stakeouts, everything will look better.’ (16)
Interrelated with carrying out a job as well as possible is, then, the notion of behaving as well as possible, or ‘to hurt as little as possible’. Soldiers who use these notions are pointing to the efforts they make to do their jobs as efficiently as they can without unnecessarily hurting the Palestinian civilians who they are confronted with. Behaving as well as possible during a military operation without hurting or upsetting the lives of Palestinian civilians too much is considered a prerequisite for being professional. A soldier comes to do his job, to carry out a specific operation or specific orders and no more than that. Unnecessary harm or harassment is seen as unprofessional and unproductive conduct and should, therefore, be avoided.

This kind of inhibitive agency is part of the more general military notion of minimizing collateral damage. Operations are, therefore, carried out in such a way as to cause as few civilian casualties as possible, always taking such casualties into account. The phrase collateral damage is, furthermore, a classic example of what Bandura calls euphemistic labelling: neutralizing your activities by the use of language that hides the fact that these cause people to die (2002).

We should add here that the definition of harassment or unnecessary harm is not clear-cut. What for an outsider might seem superfluous violent behaviour could be very legitimate in the eyes of a soldier. However, what is important here is the notion that soldiers themselves have that their work should be carried out professionally and that, hence, their behaviour towards Palestinian civilians should be ‘as good as possible’. Again the image of a unit or platoon is important here; it is important for the soldiers to be seen as professionals within the gaze of outsiders.

In the next example, Omer explains how he treated Palestinians during arrest operations. He emphasizes several times that his unit made an effort to treat people with the utmost respect, adding that this should, however, never affect the necessary use of force itself. Treating people with respect and hurting them as little as possible was, then, limited by the safety considerations of the soldiers. Nonetheless, from what he says, it becomes obvious that a real effort was made by him and his comrades to perform their work as smoothly and respectfully as possible:

‘I don’t know how it is in other units, but we would take care all the time to behave well and for example we do an arrest and take the head of the house [baál habait], we don’t do it in front of the family, we take him aside so they won’t see. So there won’t be hysteria. We separate the women from the men, also if you want to check that he doesn’t have explosives on him, then every man that comes out of the house you tell him [in Arabic] take up your shirt, take down your pants, to check that there isn’t something there. So first of all you take the men aside so it won’t be in front of the
women, and not in front of the children, as much as possible yes, so far as it doesn’t endanger the force. Because with them the honour [*kavod*] is very important, to tell the head of the house to take down his pants in front of his daughters that’s really … that really hurts their honour [*kavod*]. We try not to do this, to take them to the side, also on the issue of honour is that all the time they tell us not to touch their belongings in the house, the lights you have to turn on, you have no choice, sometimes you don’t have a choice, there are houses you have to turn upside down if they say there are weapons inside, what can you do, then you turn the house upside down, but we try not to break things, but to try to keep their privacy as much as possible, to take care of their property, to hurt as little as possible, to damage [*lehazik*] as little as possible.’ (16)

In short, doing a good job, without any soldiers getting hurt and with a minimum of suffering on the Palestinian side, is perceived to be an important part of soldiers’ professional conduct. This emphasizes good behaviour, which has as its goal to reflect positively on the soldiers when outsiders are scrutinizing them. Behaving properly, however, is limited by the safety considerations of the soldiers and seems to have an instrumental character, an issue that will be discussed in detail later.

**Following orders**

Not surprisingly, ‘following orders’ is an often recurring theme in the interviews with soldiers. Soldiers everywhere, at all times in history, have learned that one of the most important skills they should master is that of following orders, preferably without asking too many questions. This notion was already touched on when the ‘small head’ (*rosh katan*) theme was discussed in Part 2. From the examples above, this repertoire could already be deciphered. Again and again soldiers point to the fact that they were ordered to perform the tasks that they characterize as ‘a job’ and can therefore not be expected to take responsibility for.

Responsibility is very clearly displaced to different parties, mostly upwards to commanders or even the state. Important here is the location of agency: who does what and who takes responsibility for the actions carried out? Trust is put in the commanders to give the right orders to their soldiers as the latter do not see the situation from the ‘system’s point of view’ (a notion that will be discussed shortly) and thus have to rely on the knowledge of their superiors.
Following orders, then, is for many soldiers closely related to their lack of ability to deliberate on their activities and to their very limited decision-making opportunities. Oren, a soldier from the engineering corps, illustrates this in short and simple terms:

‘You don’t have so much freedom to choose what you do, you have orders and you do that, after maybe you think whether its good or not. It doesn’t matter if you agree or not.’ (3)

For Shmuel, it is also clear-cut: the job of a soldier is to trust his superiors and not to deliberate about operations. While talking about an arrest operation that he had carried out as a soldier in the Givati Brigade, he explained that the job of a soldier is basically to execute orders:

‘We wanted to know, it wasn’t like we really didn’t know why we are doing this, we know what this guy did, and why we have to take him outside on this night, we didn’t get too much inside it … we knew that if they say we have to do it, it comes from above and probably they know what they are doing. It’s not our task to say no, we won’t do it.’ (19)

Zadok, who later became a commander in a unit of the Nahal, remembers that as a soldier he had the same kind of ideas about what his job was:

‘I would just do what they told me, not look left or right to see what is going on there, but I’m in the military now, this is my job, I’m here completely.’ (26)

Following orders, then, is one of the aspects of the ‘lay’ (but professional) or work-related discourse that Israeli soldiers use. We can conclude that doing their job as they are ordered to do, doing it in the best way possible, without hurting others or getting hurt themselves is very central to the way these Israeli soldiers look at their activities. Seeing their work as a job and no more than that, a job that has to be done with no questions asked, makes their position regarding the implications of the work more distant. Such strategies, then, entail implicatory denial (Cohen 2001), the displacement of responsibility, euphemistic labelling and an inhibitive form of moral agency (Bandura 2002).
Strategic talk

After looking at professionalism from the layman’s perspective that soldiers have, it is time to look at a more strategic discourse that they make use of, one that is, however, mostly used by their commanders. With this strategic discourse I would like to highlight a manner of speech that focuses on explaining, in military terms, why certain actions are carried out or why specific behaviour is necessary. Moral explanations and justifications are lifted from more personal accounts up to a strategic level.

A system’s point of view

The discourse discussed here is, thus, more system-like and is, as such, different from the ‘lay’ discourse. In this first example this becomes clear:

‘The fear we, as commanders, try to create is a fear of being caught. At this checkpoint we catch you, not at this checkpoint we hit, if you are suspect you will be checked, you will be caught if you are suspect. Not a fear of violence, or shouting. We want order at the checkpoint, because order is professionalism.’ (1)

Staying within the realm of professionalism, Adam explains here what soldiers themselves often called a ‘system’s point of view’ or *mahat ma’arechti*. The main objective of his checkpoint is that terrorists should fear going through it because its security procedures are so thorough. Importantly, as was also pointed out when discussing the film material of the Hawara checkpoint in the first section, order has to be maintained at the checkpoint, as this is crucial for working professionally. This point, however, can also be used as a moral justification for activities that may harm others. Soldiers or commanders use a system’s point of view like this to indicate how they speak as part of the system.

In the next quote, this point of view is clearly visible. Eviatar, a former company commander of an elite unit of the artillery, explains a mission from a completely different viewpoint to that of a soldier. He does not only look at one checkpoint to see how it functions but includes the security of the whole section in his analysis of the situation. His point of view is, then, much broader than that of normal soldiers and, because of his function, more responsibility is taken by him:

‘The goal of your mission is not to stop the 3 cars you are supposed to stop, but it is to form a security force that checks, that reacts, that forms a broader aspect of
security in the section let’s call it that. An example: one day a commander came and asked what to do and did the opposite of what happened the day before. After I explained it to him, things started to look different. That’s my task to explain how things should happen, what actually happens on the ground, for that you have your commanders. They understand the general spirit [ruah] of what really happens, how many cars go through, that’s what the commanders are for.’ (5)

This point of view is also expressed when commanders voice their ideas about how soldiers should function and what lessons they want to teach them. Golan, who was quoted earlier, explains how he would educate his soldiers to treat people with respect while doing their job at the same time, something he hopes that his soldiers will internalize:

‘First of all that they understand the sensitivity of every word that comes out of their mouths. Like when a soldier of mine stands at a checkpoint with a gun, he has to understand, and many don’t understand, they get in this mode of “come and stop” many times you have to get into a state of mind of anger. To communicate some kind of … you’re not a babysitter, you’re a soldier, your function is not to start a conversation, you have to check the car, you can do it with a smile. Maybe the other side will think if I come here with a bomb and smile he’ll let me through. So you don’t have to be nice, but be respectful. It doesn’t contradict. So first of all let them understand the effects of their attitude towards the local population, because if you’re checking this person now, big chance you’ll check him again tomorrow and the coming 4 months every morning.’ (7)

In this explanation, Golan clarifies why it is so important for him to convey to his soldiers that they should do their jobs ‘with a smile’ and without anger; it is important to ‘soften’ the other side (the Palestinians) since they will come through the checkpoint again and again. Through respectful treatment one can possibly avoid friction. In what he says, two seemingly contradictory roles that a soldier should perform are mentioned: he has to be tough and do his job (‘you’re not a babysitter’) but he should also do it with respect, maybe even with a smile on his face. This way of speaking, combining toughness and professionalism with respectful treatment, is something commanders, in particular, adopt when speaking about the important traits that their soldiers should have. Eviatar gives another good example:
‘I would use the terms of assertiveness [takijut] and politeness [adimut], on the face of it two opposites, but very complete from my point of view. If there is a mission and we are going to fulfil it till the end also if it means that this person has to wait here 4 hours at the checkpoint because they ask us to keep him, or if we need to check a car, we will get everything out of the car. The question is how you do it. You don’t throw anything, you don’t start messing in his stuff but you ask the person to take the stuff out of the car. Maybe it doesn’t interest the person if you do it in a polite way, but it’s more to keep our human dignity [tsel' em enash].’ (5)

The main point here is that Eviatar expects his soldiers to work professionally while refraining from harming people’s property without good reason. The last sentence of Eviatar’s quote is very important as it indicates a significant phenomenon to which I shall return in Chapter 7. Eviatar’s argument is that the polite behaviour of soldiers is not so much important for the Palestinians to whom it is directed as it is for the human dignity of the soldiers. This, I shall later call a form of instrumental morality.

Dror, a commander in the paratroopers, calls his professional attitude a ‘cold’ one. He does not get personal with Palestinians at the checkpoint. He, for example, will not punish them unnecessarily or get too friendly with them. The most important issue for him is to follow the rules without sidestepping them at any point in time:

‘I wouldn’t punish anyone; I would be cold, not cold to them but close to the rules. This you didn’t do as needed, we need an extra check but no … nothing. I wouldn’t offend him or discriminate against him.’ (4)

Care for the soldiers
One of the most important issues commanders have to take into account, according to their own explanations, is the safety of their soldiers. No matter what a certain operation entails, the safety and protection of the soldiers within the force takes precedence. There seems to be a moral hierarchy: first the soldiers should be safe, then the Palestinians. I will come back to this issue later. The moral strategy used is a moral justification, as actions are legitimized through the use of the ‘safety of the soldiers’ argument. In the following examples, the normality of such a strategy becomes clear:
‘There are rules about firing. That is the clearest thing in the IDF. If you are fired at, and you or your soldiers are at risk, you shoot. Or not even the soldiers that are your responsibility, it’s your friend! It’s very clear. If you think you see someone running to your friend with a knife, shoot at him.’ (1)

The moral strategy of soldiers here is to take care of themselves first and in order to accomplish this many actions are legitimized. Adam expresses the importance of the safety of the soldiers; if they are in danger you should not think twice, just shoot. The safety of the soldiers and the accompanying notion of self-defence are, thus, used as a way of explaining and legitimizing the potentially violent behaviour of soldiers as Tal shows:

‘The first time that soldiers saw me, let’s say… take someone and push him on a couch and search him or even see me cock my weapon at someone; the first time they’re in shock. I tried to explain to them all the time, don’t be afraid to cock your weapon in someone’s face. You don’t have a choice. They are a bit afraid but every time when they are in check posts and a person would come for a discussion, immediately cock your weapon and you finish the story, if that doesn’t happen then one person starts a discussion and after him another person, there is a situation, another one lets himself into the discussion, then it’s a chaos, everything is to save our lives.’ (27)

Tal is very straightforward here in his approach; as a commander in the Nahal 50 Battalion he made very clear that the soldiers’ safety was his first priority. From his language, we can conclude that he chose a fairly aggressive approach, using a significant display of force and power to control people at the checkpoints. In his eyes, however, everything was done in order to protect the soldiers. As such, Tal legitimizes his actions by pointing to the safety of his soldiers. Guy uses the same kind of arguments. During his service as a commander he told his soldiers to behave like ‘machines’ when it came to their own or their comrades’ safety:

‘So I did tell them at the checkpoints to react, first of all, I don’t mind what, but take care of yourself, if it gets to killing someone, then kill someone. And that’s what happened … There is no emotion here; I didn’t have emotion in such instances. It’s work, machines, its much easier being a machine than a human being in situations like that.’ (29)
This notion of taking care of one’s own soldiers as a crucial aspect of the units’ operations shows us an interesting professional and moral discourse, one which is directed inwards, towards the safety and well-being of the soldiers themselves. This notion of ‘inward morality’, as it could be termed, will be discussed in the next chapter.

To conclude this discussion of the professionalism theme that Israeli soldiers and their commanders use, we can say that their professional discourse gives them an opportunity to distance themselves from the activities that they are involved in that may harm other human beings. Acts are normalized as ‘just a job’, one which has to be carried out without too much deliberation from the soldiers’ side. Even when harm or suffering that is inflicted is acknowledged, the fact that one is doing one’s job and trying to do it as well as possible, directs away the attributing of any explicit responsibility. Activities that can potentially harm others can, furthermore, be explained away and morally justified under the name of professionalism.

6.4 Ideology
In the next section, I will group expressions of patriotism, nationalism and, for example, emotions concerning the defending of the state of Israel as ideological strategies. The cultural schemes that are invoked here to explain and justify the behaviour of soldiers are principled by nature and, hence, often involve strong convictions on the part of the soldier.

A sense of mission
When giving accounts of their experiences, many soldiers and commanders described a feeling that they referred to as a sense of mission, or ‘shibukut’. This feeling was especially evoked during bigger operations which they felt were important for the IDF and Israel as a whole. With this term, they highlighted a sense of connectedness to the nation, to the aims of the state and the military. They spoke about the feeling that their presence in the OPT had a real, important justification. In Bandura’s terms this is a clear moral justification in which ‘pernicious conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes’ (2002: 103). Eviatar, who stayed in the IDF as a professional for several years after his mandatory conscription period, says the following about this feeling:

‘That’s the base for everything, I wouldn’t have stayed in the military if… I don’t feel I was in professional service [kera] I just did a longer service. I’m living in a country where you have to serve 3 years and after 3 years I felt it didn’t end here. That I didn’t give what I wanted and could give more. I said on the day that it doesn’t feel
like a mission and it becomes a job, I would quit. And I did, even though the
temptations were great, I got out at that point, the next phase would be a job, that
wasn’t a mission, that wasn’t living the military.’ (5)

Interestingly, and in opposition to the notions discussed before, Eviatar even states that
the moment he felt that his military service did not feel like a mission anymore and started to be
more like a normal job, he quit. This is to say that from the moment his service became normal
and not ideological, he felt that he did not have anything to give to the IDF, referring to the
republican notion of citizenship experienced in Israel. Eviatar continues by saying that he
believes that every soldier who serves in the OPT does so for ideological reasons:

‘Furthermore every soldier that serves in the Territories fights for his home, that
doesn’t happen to an American soldier in Iraq or to a Dutch soldier of UNIFIL or
so. Every soldier fights for his home.’ (Q: ‘Do they feel it like that?’) ‘I don’t believe
them when they say “I only do it because I have to” if you don’t want, you don’t
have to serve. It’s not a taboo anymore not to serve. I believe that today everyone
that serves has an ideological reason, that he feels he has to do this and risk his life
for it.’ (5)

Dror also has a clear ideological motivation for serving and traces this back to his
upbringing in a patriotic home:

‘I wanted to be a pilot, I grew up in a “militant” house. My father is very militant.
There were a lot of stories about the army in the house, stories with values.’ (Q:
‘What values?’) ‘Comradeship and brave of heart and love for the country.’ (Q: ‘Did
you feel connected to the state?’) ‘Of course, I came from there. I feel a feeling of
mission, it holds you in difficult times that you know that if you don’t do it and he
won’t then no one will. I wanted to give as much as possible. I came to the
paratroopers. I wanted a military career, to be a platoon commander, but I knew if
not that then at least an officer, a company commander.’ (4)

Both Eviatar and Dror demonstrate a highly ideological motivated attitude towards their
service. They did not join the military because they had to, but because they really wanted to and

78 This notion communicates how, in order to receive services from the state, citizens needs to ‘give something back’. In Israel this entails serving in the military in order to receive full citizenship.
because they wanted to give whatever they could to the state. This discourse is clearly different from some of the examples given before. It is, however, important to keep in mind that such ideologically motivated ways of speaking are also, at times, used by Israeli soldiers. This can, furthermore, easily be used as a justifying or legitimizing discourse. In the next paragraph this feeling of mission is taken a bit further in order to clarify this point.

Invoking the security theme: avenging attacks on Israel or protecting Israeli civilians

One notion that fits in with this ideological strategy within soldiers’ discourse is the idea that attacks on Israel have to be avenged. By attacks on Israel one could be referring to terrorist attacks on buses, hotels or restaurants, for example. As seen before when Operation Defensive Shield (ODS) and the soldiers’ experiences of it were discussed, such events within Israeli society can have a far-reaching impact on how soldiers in the field feel and behave. A certain ‘sense of mission’ was said to overcome soldiers when they associated their duty within the OPT with the attacks on Israeli civilian centres. Military activities, then, became morally justified in light of the happenings within Israel.

Suddenly the boring work at the checkpoints or the routine of arrests became more meaningful as the soldiers realized the impact their work could have; they could be stopping or arresting potential terrorists at that very moment:

‘But there were people, especially with the chain of bombings, it started with Hotel Park, I don’t remember there was this week of another 4-5 bombings, that’s it, the IDF now has to take everything down. It’s something that you felt. People said come on let’s go in, we have to … and all of that.’ (17)

In the above quote, Yossi, a Nahal commander who participated in operations under fire during Operation Defensive Shield, recalls the mood of the soldiers around him and the language of revenge that was present. However, not only during operations such as ODS can this rhetoric be found. Assaf recalls how soldiers in his unit of the Golani Battalion reacted to talks about morality and proper behaviour given by their superiors:

‘And there were soldiers who said “what, no way, if he has a bomb, I would beat him up completely. Tomorrow he blows up my mother in Tel Aviv” so there would be the commanders that talked about the need to keep up ethics and the purity of arms and the soldiers talked straight from their emotion and their heart.’ (9)
A clear association is made by the soldiers whom Assaf is quoting between their behaviour towards Palestinian suspects or terrorists and the safety of their own families within Israeli civil society. The discrepancy between the ‘official’ discourse of the moral code of the IDF and the emotions of the soldiers is also touched upon; soldiers speak ‘from their hearts’.

Assaf also served during ODS himself and remembers how he and his comrades felt that their work was directly linked to the security of Israel:

‘It was obvious, every day there were explosions in Israel; you go to Jenin two days after we went there, there was a bomb in Megiddo. The soldiers feel it. It’s really not the cliché, “our soldiers secure the borders of the north so kiyriat Shemona won’t be bombed” it was really “pointed”, if you don’t chase this guy on the few hundred meters you are in charge of stopping those who run with the farmers, there will be a bomb in Megiddo, just like that.’ (9)

Another example of a feeling of mission is given by Golan. When he caught one of his superiors stealing a poster from a Palestinian house during an arrest operation, he told him off. This superior became very angry and called him a ‘leftist’ who did not care about Israel. Golan then reacted as follows:

‘So back in the base I told him, listen my friends are also being blown up, and I had a lot of problems… I could leave, but I didn’t want to, I felt I have to be in the Territories, because it’s important, however bad it is. So I told him, listen I don’t have to be here, I’m here because I believe that what we do is important, my friends are also being blown up in Tel Aviv and if you will talk to me like this another time.’(7)

In his angry reply, Golan made clear that he served in the Territories from choice, because he really thought it was important and not because someone had sent him there randomly. He, furthermore, directly linked the safety of his friends at home with his work in the Territories. Interestingly, a much greater amount of responsibility is taken here by soldiers and commanders for their own actions. As, in their eyes, their activities are morally and ideologically justified, they seem to have no problem in taking responsibility, thereby legitimizing suffering caused by their actions by means of the justified cause they are serving.

79 Kiyriat Shemona is one of the northern cities in Israel that has often come under fire from Hezbollah forces situated in South Lebanon.
Avenging the death of comrades

Through a story in the media in 2005, the existence of extreme feelings (and actions) of revenge amongst Israeli soldiers became public. For the first time, members of an elite unit gave their account of a military action that took place in 2002 to avenge the death of six fellow soldiers who were shot and killed at a checkpoint by Palestinian militants. The orders they received were to shoot as many Palestinian policemen as they could. The claim made was that these policemen did not stop the militants at their checkpoints and were, hence, to blame for the soldiers’ deaths. During the course of one night fifteen policemen, most of them unarmed, were shot while they were on duty at these checkpoints. The story came out in the media a few years after the killing occurred and included a videotape of the events, edited with music by members of the unit that had been involved in the operation.\(^8\)

This very serious and controversial story (which shocked the Israeli public and shook its ideas about the morality of its soldiers) is a good, but very extreme, example of activities based on revenge. It was not attacks on the nation state that were avenged here but attacks on the soldiers’ comrades. However, the case does involve the same ideological emotions as those involved in less extreme cases that can also trigger soldiers and their commanders to act in specified, often violent, ways.

This example also demonstrates the profound danger that such ideological strategies can provoke. Certain feelings, such as those discussed above, can become justifications for illegitimate violence, harassment of the other and even actual atrocities as the ‘other’ indiscriminately becomes ‘the enemy’ who has to be dealt with. The ‘other’ is dehumanized (Bandura 2002) and although responsibility for any potential suffering that is inflicted during military activities is taken, this hardship is not perceived as problematic as the actions are seen as legitimate.

From the above we can understand how much ideological feelings of patriotism, a sense of mission and feelings provoking revenge attacks can influence the actions of soldiers and the way they behave towards others. The ideological theme is a strong tool for explaining activities as it involves emotions that are difficult for an outsider to refute, which makes them even more powerful when trying to convince others.

This last point is, then, also a tool that is used by soldiers, the claim often being made that if you were not there you will not be able to understand it. This claim, which is related to issues of witnessing and the power of ‘being there’, is very strong indeed. However, it can be easily

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abused to explain away and legitimize harmful behaviour and to discard any critical voices that may be heard coming from outside.

6.5 No need for explanation

Up until now the themes discussed were themes which soldiers used to explain, justify and legitimate their behaviour and activities. However, as Cohen mentions in his work on denial (2001), sometimes there seems to be no need to justify or legitimize actions because the actor involved in certain behaviour that seems unjust to an outsider does not perceive it as such. If someone takes his or her actions as completely legitimate, there seems to be no need to explain. Maoz already discerned this in her research about soldiers in the first Intifada between 1987 and 1993: ‘legitimizers tend to minimize the emotional impact of the intifada and describe themselves as untroubled by its after-effects’ (2001: 252).

The discourse used, then, does not acknowledge any harm done to others and as such no responsibility is taken for this harm, just as if it was not there. In such cases, the behaviour of soldiers is completely normalized and no more thought is given to it. The moral strategy that is used here is what Cohen calls interpretative denial; activities and consequences are not denied, however their meaning is neutralized and not seen as problematic (2001). Maoz calls these ‘emotional mechanisms of routinization, disassociation, and distancing in coping with the violence experience of the intifada’ (2001: 251). A good example is the following testimony collected by Breaking the Silence:

‘I was guarding with a guy from the company, not one of the officers, and, he told me a story, trying to explain why he didn’t consider himself among those who abuse, and why he [could think he] used force and violence only when necessary. He told me a story about a patrol he was on, and this story was an example of why he didn’t use force. He was on the patrol with an officer. You know the patrols - stopping the cars, sometimes confiscating the vehicles, sometimes delaying the people. When you stop a car - when you’re on patrol, when you’re at a checkpoint or anywhere else - you set the rules. You have the weapon, so you set the rules. So he said to the people: “No speaking on cellular phones.” One of the Arabs in the car was on the phone and signalled that he was just finishing up the call and would be off in a second. And the guy who was telling me the story paused, and asked me: “Do you understand?! Do you understand that the Arab signalled with his hand and told me to wait a second?!” So of course I put the gun barrel to his ribs.” That incident took place right in front
of an officer. The guy telling the story had this look of amazement in his eyes that a person, an Arab, an older person, dared to signal with his hand while talking on the phone, so he placed the gun barrel to the guy’s ribs. That was the story that brought to my attention that what I used to think was out of the ordinary is actually quite ordinary.’ (BS Z 2902)

Here, the person described does not see or realize the gravity of his actions. He explains why he behaves in a violent manner, thus acknowledging his actions, but sees his activities as completely legitimate. There seems to be no doubt in his mind as to the righteousness of his actions. The situation around him is so normalized that his arguments make perfect sense to him.

In the following answer given by Barak, who served as a soldier in the Golani Brigade, to the question of whether he came across situations that he did not agree with during his service, it is clear that he sees his activities during his military service as completely justified. According to him, he never saw the suffering of someone who did not deserve it, he only saw people who shot at him and who, thus, deserved the treatment they received:

‘No never, I never saw anything that I thought was wrong or that gave me an inner conflict. Nothing like that happened. I just came into contact with people that shot at me. I never saw someone that I felt sorry for.’ (2)

When actions become so natural to a person to the point that no explanation or legitimization seems to be needed, dangerous situations can occur. No internal moral mechanism is triggered and unjust behaviour can be carried out easily without feelings of guilt. In Bandura’s terms the moral self-sanctions we naturally have are then disengaged from our conduct, this conduct generating a purely neutral meaning in our eyes.

Idealism and enthusiasm to fight
In the following quote, which has already been used before, Assaf gives a good example of how other motivations for action can be combined with ideological ones involving avenging attacks carried out in Israel. He describes how such reasoning for using weapons might sound:

‘It’s the atmosphere, you are there, there is the media, it’s easy to say, it’s the dream of every soldier that when the camera comes and the soldier stands there and explains what happened “how great is Golani” they have a headline in the
newspaper, and how great is company this and this, that every one knows they were there, even without their names appearing. It comes from that and second of all you have 18-year-old guys and you teach them to fight and you push them and they walk around with all those bullets and don’t use them and suddenly they can. They teach him to shoot on all kinds “tools” he only saw in movies, and now he has the opportunity and I also hate them because I see them exploding on my friends every day on television. So why not? …of course there is why not, you don’t think too much, you are 18-19 you are sure you are an adult.’ (9)

Several themes come to the fore in this quote: enthusiasm and pride to have been in an important operation that has been discussed in the press, general enthusiasm for using the guns soldiers walk around with and often do not get to use and feelings of hate towards the Palestinians who are collectively blamed for the suicide attacks within Israel. Here it is also important to note the random explanation some soldiers give for their actions e.g. to use the guns they have been dying to use in real-life shootings.

Another example is given by Tal who explains how breaking the routine through ‘real action’, which has been discussed earlier, can motivate soldiers to action:

‘Listen when you stand in a post, in the end you’re dying for, you stand in the post 8 hours, you are dying that someone will come by with a weapon, a terrorist will come by with a weapon and …And you put a bullet in his head. You are dying for, that he’ll come already that the routine will be broken, not … it’s there, everyone has it.’ (27)

Golan realizes that such a strategy can be dangerous when he comments on the revenge operation directed at the Palestinian policemen, which was discussed before:

‘Let’s say the order was legal but to get it to the level of action of the enthusiasm it’s dangerous, childlike, if you’re in the field you’re looking for the action, you want to feel like a man, you’re looking for “business” [in yan] you want to experience. You want to do the thing you were training for, if you get shot at and you kill the terrorist, you become a hero… I had a fantasy, during all of my service that I would shoot a terrorist and then I would save him. It’s not like I wanted it to really happen.’ (7)
He describes a feeling that he also experienced himself of enthusiasm to get into action, to go out and look for it, to feel good with it. This made him feel like a real man. His own fantasy, as he called it, even involved saving the terrorist he would shoot, which indicates his desire to be involved in action but to remain humane and innocent at the same time.

The strategy that becomes visible when soldiers explain their behaviour in terms of a certain enthusiasm to fight can be seen as a form of interpretative denial. The actions and their consequences are acknowledged by the soldiers but they are not explained or legitimized because they are not seen as problematic. They are the result of an enthusiasm for combat, which is something many soldiers grow up with or learn within the military. The enthusiasm that accompanies such actions makes them even less likely to become morally problematic for the soldiers who carry them out.

6.6 Critical voices: moral re-sensitizing

The last kind of moral strategy that I would like to discuss is the one that contradicts many of the former themes that we have explored. It is, however, an important one as it shows us a different side of soldiers’ discourse that cannot be ignored. The strategy I am referring to is that of re-sensitizing, of finding some kind of connection with the victim, of acknowledging the suffering and pain of the ‘other’ and of truly sympathizing with them (Lifton 1973). Maoz’ ‘ambivalent’ soldier fits well here (2001). Whereas most soldiers quoted in this study had some reservations, the ones discussed here had clear doubts about the violence used within the OPT against Palestinians.

You could say that soldiers who use this strategy see the ‘other’ as a human being and as an individual. They do this, for example, by making a comparison with their own situation to realize more deeply how the other person involved in the interaction must feel.

‘If it was my home’

Some soldiers took the step of comparing a scene that they came across, for example a Palestinian house in the middle of the night, with their own situation back home. How would they react, they ask themselves, if a few foreign soldiers suddenly barged into their home and terrified their little brother and sister? How would they react if they saw their elderly father being told to pull up his shirt and pull down his pants at a checkpoint? When such questions are asked, the soldier in question is identifying deeply with the ‘other’ or the victims of his actions – he puts himself in their place.

The soldiers who made such comparisons usually did so after their service was over and after they had had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the field from a physical and
mental distance. During their presence in the OPT, such reflection was almost impossible due to factors described in Part 2 of this study, factors such as having no time to think things through or being too tired and numbed by the workload.

R. Lifton calls this identification with one’s victims ‘re-sensitization’ (1973) when he explains how soldiers in situations of war, the Vietnam war in his case, with clear definitions of who was their enemy could still feel sympathy for members of the other side. Quite a number of soldiers testified to occasionally feeling such identification. Often, however, this identification came after their discharge from the military. Assaf gives a clear example:

‘It was bad, it doesn’t matter, also if you checked and everything was okay and you didn’t hold them up for a minute, they … it’s not nice when a boy, I would always think of my father, a boy of my age would come to him, I would imagine my father and a friend of mine he didn’t know, who is he to tell him to get his hands up, to put up his shirt up to his armpits and turn around, who is he that he will tell him? Where is the respect, and if he looks suspicious and I would put him on the side in front of all his children and I would check with that device and I would have someone else check him and stand in front of him with a weapon just because he grew a beard because his father just died. And I think he is suspicious and he didn’t have water to wash so he is dirty … but these are things I know now because I matured and saw other things. Then … you’re like “catch terrorists, respect”, that here there won’t be [a terror attack].’ (9)

Zadok also makes the connection with the people he controls and his own family:

‘I’m radical, also with Orthodox and also with Arabs, Palestinians. But still it’s a human being after all. He has to get the minimal respect, even though you don’t like him and … you give him respect, because in the end you have to understand it’s a human being that stands in front of you, it can be a man of 80 years old, it could be your grandfather. And I would see the people that would come and give the slap, as a soldier I would stand on the side and laugh but as a commander a thing like that wouldn’t be done with me.’ (26)
‘As little as possible’
As already discussed above, there is a notion in soldiers’ discourse about doing their work without hurting anyone. This can come, as we have seen before, from an idea that such behaviour is unprofessional and doesn’t ‘look good’ but it can, of course, also come from a genuine sense of the importance of caring for another human being. The soldiers using this discourse, then, really seem to acknowledge the suffering of the ‘other’ and see the person in front of them as a human being like themselves, a notion that does not always seem to come naturally to soldiers. These soldiers seem uncomfortable with their role as occupiers and stress continuously that they would curb the damage they were doing as much as possible during their service. Ben-Ari came across similar attitudes when doing research within his own reserve unit during the first Intifada in the 1990s. He conveys how he and his fellow soldiers tried to ‘account for our actions in terms of somehow humanizing the occupation’ (1989: 179). Doron, who makes an effort to explain his attitude towards the Palestinian population, provides a good example:

‘but still I had days at checkpoints where you have the most friction with the Palestinians, and I would say to myself a lot of times, in the end they’re human beings, really, I would try, in a lot of situations, to come towards them as much as possible [lekratam]. Even if I would get different orders. They would say close the checkpoint, no one goes through, you don’t have to give a shit and then a mother would come with 2 babies in her arms, she would say I need to go, I don’t know, to the clinic, go through, what can I say to you. It’s okay, there were a lot of instances I would look the other way and I would come towards them but there were a lot of instances that I would know they were trying to play with that, and then on purpose I wouldn’t let them, I would radicalize my opinions, and my stances and I wouldn’t let them play with it. In general I would come towards them a lot. Usually I saw them as human beings and only 5 percent of them as terrorists, all the rest are really people that want to live quietly.’ (23)

Yossi explains how important it was for him, coming from a leftist kibbutz background, to treat every human being as such, no matter if he was a terrorist or not:

‘And one of the first things that is written in the ethical code of the IDF, is human dignity and comradeship. And I think that on the subject of the checkpoints, it was a subject that was obliged also for me, also for the soldiers and for everyone actually,
to show this … It’s something that … for me it was easier to respect this and to do this because of the education from home, the leftist thing, to give them a state, and … to give them a chance and this and that, this helped me in the end, because I from the beginning and also after Jenin and all that, I think I had not the intelligence identification, it is possible I checked terrorists and possible I didn’t, but to give them all respect at the checkpoints, if they are women if there isn’t a female police officer then not to check and only check men, and to check with respect, not to take the vehicles apart.’ (17)

Yossi emphasizes in this example that, especially after the heavy fighting in the refugee camp of Jenin during Operation Defensive Shield, many soldiers had difficulties treating Palestinians respectfully because of feelings of revenge and because of anger about the attacks in Israel and the loss of the lives of soldiers that the IDF had to cope with.

A few interviewees had even more ‘deviant’ or critical ideas than most; they were different because of their highly critical outlook on the military and its activities in the OPT. These soldiers generally came from a leftist upbringing and seemed to sympathize with the Palestinians who suffered from the activities of the IDF more than others.

However, as these soldiers were still acting within the same military framework that they were criticizing, they felt that they did not have a lot of opportunities to act upon their critical thoughts. Gal, who is now active within the organization Breaking the Silence and who served in Battalion 50 of the Nahal Brigade, sums up the emotions he felt during his service as follows:

‘So there was this thought that okay we will do it, we will get through it, we will do it as good as possible, we’ll harm as little as possible, we will get through it, it will be okay.’(22)

He and his comrades were some of the first soldiers during the second Intifada who felt that they had to take action, to ‘do something’ against the situation that they were encountering in the OPT, especially in Hebron. They decided not to make too much noise outside of the military, however, trying instead to promote change from within, without involving the public or the press. Within their unit they published articles which were critical of the situation and asked questions about the reasons they had to be in the OPT. A clear moral outlook was present here. This, however, did not result in concrete activities that could really change the reality these soldiers found themselves in.
In a critical tone, Doron explained how the military trusts its soldiers to be moral without clearly getting across what their behaviour should be. The soldiers are left in a moral vacuum within which they have to cope as well as they can:

‘That’s a thing, that I believe that the military doesn’t put enough thought in, they trust that people will be moral … so okay the child is a wanted man, but in the house there are 8 other brothers, parents, two grandmothers and four uncles. How you treat them? Me and my friends, usually like normal human beings, you know that they usually haven’t done anything; you treat them the best you can. That’s it.’ (23)

Such moral considerations taken into account by soldiers are important to point out. The moral agency that is shown here is again of an inhibitive nature; it entails refraining from inhumane behaviour (Bandura 2002). The actual realization that certain activities are immoral or illegitimate, however, often comes late or leaves the soldier in an isolated position with not much room to act upon it.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter several dominant discursive strategies used by Israeli soldiers when giving accounts of their experiences were discussed. Strategies of passivity, professionalism and ideology were used in some way or another to explain, justify and legitimize actions and decision-making in the field. While most strategies involved acknowledgment of the suffering of the ‘other’, in certain instances the victims of actions carried out by soldiers were not recognized as such. Moral strategies that were uncovered showed aspects of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility (Bandura 2002). Furthermore, two of the types of denial distinguished by Cohen were also found: implicatory and interpretative denial.

In most cases soldiers realized that their activities and presence within the OPT caused harm to Palestinian civilians. This realization, however, almost never spurred the soldiers into action to change the situation they and the Palestinians were in. A sense of acceptance of the existing situation was very persistent and soldiers seemed to not be motivated or willing to change it.

Responsibility for the soldiers’ activities and the potential harm it could cause was, then, through the use of several strategies, avoided at all times. A passive, professional or idealist
discourse helped the soldiers and their commanders to distance themselves from the consequences of their actions, partly neutralizing these.

In the next chapter these strategies and their consequences will be brought together through a discussion of the instrumental character the morality of Israeli soldiers in the OPT has. By looking at this phenomenon within different dimensions, clearer insights into the moralities of Israeli soldiers will be sought.