

Alon Dahan: The Story of My Military Service and Injury in Seven Acts

Act I

My name is Alon Dahan. I was drafted into the IDF at the end of 1988. A brief stint in the Navy made it clear to me that staying on the ships did not do me any good, that everything I eat comes right out, I lose weight. It turns out that the sea is not for me and I decide to return to the more natural place for humans - Land. For our family, this means only one thing: The 12th Battalion of the Golani Infantry Brigade: My father served there, my cousins, the entire family was united in the opinion that there is the IDF and there is the Golani Brigade, which in our opinion was an entirely different thing.

The truth is that I was basically forced to step off of the missile boat because a dramatic loss in weight had sent me on a short hospitalization at the well-known Schneller camp in Jerusalem. It was here I realized that the Navy was a great way to lose weight but was not such a good place for me.

Act II

Indeed, as it turned out, the sea was not for me. I found myself serving at the BEZEQ camp, located between Zbebda and Kabatiya, two very hostile Arab villages. I remember phoning my parents to inform them that I had been transferred to the Golani Brigade and that they can finally relax. I was posted in the same battalion as my father, the 12th Battalion (Barak).

That great joy didn't make my service an easy one: basic training, which included all the difficult training levels from the individual level to the level of integration in battalion and brigade exercises, urban warfare, traversing a narrow water passage, and more. It's a three-day battery of challenges, the culmination of our special training track, including of 120 kilometers march – at the end of which we received our much coveted berets, combined with shooting exercises every day, and operational activity in the Qalandiya refugee camp, near Jerusalem, where I learn how difficult it is to defend this land; mobs of frantic elderly, women and children, swarming towards our observation outpost, manned by three soldiers.

There was an incessant barrage of stones towards us. Although we were armed, we were unable to shoot. The stone throwers were usually hiding behind young children. We locked the iron door on the roof, and I took cover and looked for a clear target, one that did not hide behind a woman or child. Sometimes I succeeded, although this was rare. The stones on our bodies left black and blue marks. We called for assistance over the radio and were told not to shoot as we are to avoid hurting innocent civilians. Back up finally arrives, a few tear gas grenades and the crowd disperse.

Act III

We are in a tent encampment inside Qalandia, and soon we will be going to NCO course after which we will be joining the rest of the regiment. A car with an Arab license plate stops in front of the encampment. The soldier guarding the post cocks his weapon points his rifle to the driver's head. The tension is high. The driver shouts some words in unintelligible Arabic

which no one understands. We have already heard of such cases, at the end of which it turns out that the driver hid a bomb or something else undesirable. But something in this situation didn't quite fit in with a terrorist's profile. The man had called out to us to come to the car. We then saw there were three children in the back, his wife and a baby in front of her. The front windshield was completely smashed, and Bilad, our Druze comrade translated the man's shouts.

He said, "They threw stones at me next to the cinder block factory, and they killed my child." The medic looked at the three-month-old baby, whose small skull was bleeding, from the stones of the Arab children who thought that this three-month-old boy was an "enemy of the Palestinians".

The child was evacuated by helicopter to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and was saved. We put on our protective vests and went out to look for the perpetrators. At the end of the evening we saw them, climbing the mountain and indiscriminately hurling cinder blocks at the vehicles of passersby. We neutralized them. The brigade commander sent us a letter congratulating us along with a chocolate cake, the kind you find at the army PX store and choke on when you try to eat it...

Act IV

Inside Gaza, we are in a building that used to be a police station, I think. The hostility is great, and the tension is not easy, but, one of our commanders says, it is preferable that the conflict areas be here and not at home. I quite agree that if it's a choice between this or my family, then the dilemma is over – I'll do everything to protect my family, my country.

That weekend it was my turn to stay on the base for Shabbat. Everyone got out and I found myself over a pot of potatoes on kitchen duty.

Two minutes earlier, I had been informed on the phone that my father was in poor condition after a heart attack. The cook who overheard the conversation told my commander and he decided to send me home on leave.

I'm outside, out of Gaza, on my way to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, to visit my father who had just had a heart attack, and where do I find him once I'm there? At the smoking corner, of course.

I find it rather strange and ironic - my father at the hospital worrying about his son in Gaza who worries about his father who's at the hospital.

Act V

After our routine security operations and maneuvers, we are transferred up north to Hushnia, on the Golan Heights for training. My regimental commander said I had two options to choose from: going on a regimental exercise with my comrades in the company and spend Shabbat in the army, or taking part in a big maneuver/exercise, as a radio the regimental operations officer's radio operator, complete the exercise and be released to go home for a long weekend, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

The following Sunday I was supposed to go out to the officers' course. I wasn't worried as the regimental commander had promised me that I would be back with my comrades serving as the regimental intelligence officer.

I decided to go out on the maneuvers as the operations officer radio man. I found myself running over the bumpy terrain of the Golan Heights, radio on my back, right behind the very hefty officer, filled with motivation, knowing that I would soon be home for a very long weekend. Towards the end of the exercise, we were sent to another location where we were supposed to hook up with another force near the Kuneitra Pass.

At this spot there are two large basalt walls which were erected in order block the advance onto the road of any armored vehicles and tanks. In time of war, explosives are detonated under these basalt walls. Surrounding them is a large minefield.

The young driver who was taking us must have fallen asleep and the vehicle drove right into the minefield and crashed into the booby-trapped wall. Miraculously, there was no explosion. Everyone froze on the spot, fearing not to step on a mine. I had completely broken my right hand. The very large spare wheel of the truck we were in had come loose and began rolling through the truck on its way to crash into the booby-trapped wall in the middle of the mine field. Unfortunately, on its way, it struck me on the back leaving me completely paralyzed from the chest down.

We sit there for hours and do not move, fearing an explosion. At first, I thought there was a dead body on top of me and that's why I couldn't move. I asked a friend to help me pick up whoever or whatever had fallen on me, so I could get up. "You're alone," he replied. I realized I wasn't wrong; these are indeed my shoes and my legs, and I can't move.

We began shooting into the air to call for help, we had nearly run out of ammunition, when suddenly we hear voices coming from the distant road, it was someone speaking Arabic. Turns out it was a Druze who had also served in the IDF, heard the shots and called for help. Forces arrived soon enough and realized a helicopter had to be called to evacuate.

There I was, lying in the minefield, waiting for an urgent evacuation by the elite rescue unit-66, and thinking to myself, as the ropes are lifting the gurney, on which I was tied, onto the helicopter, 'Why in a world so advanced, aren't there people who invest in designing more aesthetic looking wheelchairs?' Then I imagined myself lying helplessly in my bed forever because that is how I pictured disabled people.

Act VI

I am already past the stage of inertia. After a year-long hospitalization at Rambam and then at Tel Hashomer, after completing my matriculation exams and studying for a BA and an MA, I have already received confirmation to go ahead with my PhD on the messianic doctrine of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

All through this time I was going to Tel Aviv's Beit Halochem. (At that time, there wasn't one yet in Jerusalem.) I began being active in various sports, proving to myself that where I had seen despair and dead ends, there is hope and optimism, to succeed, to strive for more and more achievements.

Beit Halochem is a place of faith, of fulfilling dreams, of believing in oneself, even if one remains broken and wounded, with physical and mental limitations, it elevates one out of a hopeless situation based on excuses that justify inertia and lack of motivation. Beit Halochem also helps one set one's dreams along a horizon of realistic ambitions and results to which one can aspire, and which one can fulfill over and over again. This led me to think to myself that if I succeed as much as I can in this wonderful place, I would want to give back as much of myself as I can to Beit Halochem.

Indeed, today, serving as Chairman of the Board of Jerusalem's Beit Halochem, I now invest most of my time and energy in the effort to improve the services at the centre as much as possible, expanding and increasing the activities, adding more and more content, improving the structure, and increasing the investments to ensure that it is equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and innovative technology.

My doctoral dissertation was awarded the Shlomiok Award for Excellence, and was published in Hebrew and English, with the assistance of the ZDVO. Since then I have managed to write another novel that was also published with the help of the ZDVO.

Act VII

I enter the classroom, wheeling myself towards the lecturer's table, on my first day as a lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A shocked student approaches me and explains to me slowly, so that I can understand – perhaps she thought that everyone in a wheelchair also suffers from difficulty in comprehension – that this table I now occupy actually is intended for the lecturer. I then attempt, to the best of my ability, to not embarrass her as I explain to her that everything is fine, that I know the lecturer very well and that I don't think it will bother him that I'm sitting here, quite the contrary.

But she persists, "You don't understand," she says. "This isn't the place for the handicapped. You have a special place there." She said, pointing to the place she thought was special for handicapped. The lesson begins, everyone is seated and so is she. Suddenly, the realization came that this disabled person, ... he is the lecturer. The student leaves the hall embarrassed and does not return for the rest of the year.

I understand that this conflict will never really go away, even after the academic title and all the other achievements I will attain in life.

Despite all this, it is impossible to ignore the fact that this story is part and parcel of the story of the ZDVO and is also a story of hope.