

Avi Schaefer '13: To those interested in creating peace in the Middle East

By Avi Schaefer

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An open letter to the group Common Ground, from a former Israeli Soldier:

My name is Avi Schaefer. I am a freshman at Brown. I'm the one who doesn't quite look like a freshman, who doesn't quite act like a freshman and who generally shies away from the question, "So what did you do during the three years you weren't in school?"

You know me as the quiet person who sat in the back of Common Ground meetings. I tried to speak up, but my opinions were not welcomed. No one echoed my call for dialogue — this is why I can no longer come. This is why I felt that I had to write a letter.

As a good friend put it, "Avi, it's time to tell people the truth! Why are you afraid to tell everyone what you have done?"

I was afraid, because I don't know how to convince you that I dream of peace, desire it more than anything and have devoted my life thus far to it. How do I convince you of this, after I tell you that I volunteered to fight in the Israeli Defense Forces? If I said that I decided to go not because of hatred, but rather to work for peace, would you believe me? I went to the army so that my children will not have to — a dream I fear may not come true. I am telling you this, Common Ground: Justice and Equality in Palestine/Israel, so you know my story, to implore you to consider what I have to say.

I came to Brown looking for an environment that embodies the qualities of expression, open-mindedness and understanding. I arrived optimistically searching to meet others devoted to a common goal: forging lasting peace.

Imagine my utter disappointment as I went to a meeting of your group, Common Ground, looking for a forum of honest dialogue, to establish two states for two peoples, to find only the Palestinian side being represented, understood and shared. There was no attempt to recognize hardships on Israelis or assign mutual blame for conflicts.



I know that the group's intentions are good, but this situation is too nuanced, too complicated and too important to only share the Palestinian side. As my father always says, "An enemy is someone whose story we have not yet heard." Only through recognition of the other side will there be peace.

When both sides truly understand that Israelis and Palestinians have a right to live, a need for legitimate safety and a desire to envision a more peaceful future for their children, then there will be peace. Can we move past the nuances to work together? Can we understand each other in order to help both Israelis and Palestinians realize the other side's story? If we at Brown cannot create a forum to understand each other, how can we ever assume that this will be created in the Middle East?

I am writing to you, Common Ground, to urge you to embody your name. Otherwise you should be honest and change your name, clearly stating that you are a pro-Palestinian group. If you truly want to be a place for common ground, then you should look to further honest dialogue.

While you bring both Palestinians and Israelis to speak of the situation, you carefully bring only those who support your one side, and tell your one story. Your most recent events brought in Israeli voices who do not represent general view of Israeli society.

If you are truly concerned about sharing the unheard voice, about achieving lasting peace, about finding the common ground that Jews, Muslims, Christians, Israelis, Palestinians and other citizens of the world all care about, you will be true to your name, and work towards peace. You will not demonize and vilify the Israeli side alone.

Let's figure out how we can work together to do something productive to honor your name and find our common ground. I am here, ready and anxiously waiting for you to work with me, not against me. Do not give me another reason to lose hope, because my patience is sadly running out. I wait for the day that the words of the Prophet Isaiah will ring true: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

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