

Orthodox Soldiers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There is a serious battle going on in Israel, not against its external enemies or internal deficiencies, but over the issue of whether ultra-Orthodox young men should be able to escape military service by claiming that they are scholars.

It was the first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, who bowed to pressure from the greatest rabbis of the generation to allow deferment to yeshivah students. The argument was that they should be allowed to concentrate on study and rebuild religious life and spirit after the Holocaust, which had all but obliterated the Eastern European centers of Jewish learning. After all, university students could get deferment, why not yeshivah students?

The centrist, religious Zionists always enlisted on principal, and they also supported various programs that enabled religious students to combine full military service with study. Today they are a very powerful and successful element in both the rank and file and the leadership of the modern Israeli army.

Another alternative that originated at that time was the permission granted to religious girls to do social service without having to leave a more secluded environment and be forced into the secular and more sexually challenging mixed world of the regular army.

In its initial stages, the arrangement was admirable and fair. The great Hassidic leader of Viznitz in the fifties, the "Imrei Chaim", actually agreed to send those of his students who were not academically inclined or totally committed to study, into the army in dedicated "religious units". It is a myth that none of the ultra-Orthodox has done military service. In the 1967 war, army trucks came down into Meah Shearim on Shabbat to pick Chasidim in full regalia to join their units. But over time, not hundreds but thousands sought permanent deferment, including many totally unsuited to a life of study. And now the overwhelming majority of the ultra-Orthodox, or Charedi, Jews refuse to serve.

But the problem was not just the restriction of the pool of potential defenders of the land. Deferment meant that one could not work if one didn't serve. So a culture of indolent unemployment has now permeated swathes of the very religious world in Israel.

As with Israeli politics in general, no one wants to make any concessions and they fight the issue as though it were a matter of life and death. New arguments surface, such as the survival of the Jewish people being dependent on its religious qualities not just the physical ones. Of course that is true; but never in Jewish history have Jews shirked the responsibility of self-defense and fighting to preserve their identity and safety.

The legitimate fear that a secular, mixed army conflicted with religious values was initially met by providing special units. But by the time I encountered Viznitz in the nineties and asked Rebbe Moishele (who sadly died this year) why he had stopped the religious units, he replied that his followers would no longer tolerate them. If ever there was a case of the tail wagging the dog.

Secular and indeed moderate religious parties have tried to modify the situation by requiring some sort of military service for all but the really serious scholars. After all, university deferment requires some measure of assessment, why not yeshivah students?

A public committee was appointed in 1999 by the then prime minister and current defense minister, Ehud Barak, and headed by former Supreme Court Justice Tzvi Tal. It recommended a continuation of the exemptions to yeshivah students subject to conditions. At the age of 22, yeshivah students could choose between one year of civil service alongside a paying job or a shortened 16-month military service plus future service in the reserves. But, of course, the ultra-Orthodox leadership did not want to be seen weakening their stand. They rejected the proposal and only a few individuals took advantage.

Last February the High Court of Justice ruled that the law was unconstitutional. But now pressure is building in the country, as well as the Knesset, to face the issue once again. And because of the new coalition deal Netanyahu engineered between Likud and Kadima, the votes of the religious parties are no longer as crucial. Changes now have a greater chance of success than ever before. Although I suspect the current vogue for secular politicians to buy blessings from wonder rabbis indicates that superstition might still trump common sense.

I accept the argument that young men brought up sheltered from an outside world of values totally antithetic to theirs would find it had to adjust to the rigors of an overwhelmingly secular army. But there are plenty of possibilities for less physical and more cerebral analytical jobs in more restricted or protected environments. There are all kinds of ways of ensuring that they contribute to the physical safety of the country as well as the spiritual. There really is absolutely no excuse. Where there is a will there is a way.

I blame the secular parties for much of the electoral and political corruption and stalemate because they failed to change the electoral system when they could have. If they now have an opportunity to address the unfairness of the current situation in which almost a third of the male population refuses to enlist into any form of public service, then they will be as responsible as the extreme religious for the internal divisions and the external dangers that can only get worse as time goes by. Israel is as much threatened from within as it is from without.