

To Serve or Not to Serve

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

My friend Yori Yanover was recently sacked as editor of the online Jewish Press. His crime was a biting condemnation of a demonstration of protestors in New York against a proposed law, now passed by the Knesset, requiring a significant number of Israeli Charedi men to serve in the Israeli army or do some form of social service even within their own communities.

Yori simply pointed out the lies that that the campaign perpetuates both in Israel and abroad: "That the bill aims to destroy Torah", but the bill is not requiring every yeshivah student to serve; genuine scholars will be exempted. "That the army will destroy the religious life of Charedi recruits"; there are thousands of religious young men who have served and remained religious. "That those religious politicians and rabbis who support the draft are heretics." None of this is true or makes. It should be held up to the ridicule it deserves.

What is their case? It is first and foremost that the God of Israel is the defender of the Jewish people, and that this should be enough to protect Israel from its enemies. In principle that may be true, but from the time immemorial the Israelites were commanded to defend themselves by taking up arms. So one is bound to wonder if it was OK for Abraham, Moses, King David, and indeed Judah Maccabee, why would it not be permitted for Jews living today. Anyway, doesn't self-defense trump most of the laws of the Torah? Isn't training to learn how to defend oneself against imminent and real threats self-defense too?

The sad fact is that one section of our people has come to expect the other to go to war and die to defend them. That cannot be an ethical position, even if you do believe that serving God is the highest good. Not only, but the bill is offering an alternative to military service; it is called community service. It has even included an agreement with Chabad to exempt a number of young men from community service in Israel to serve communities abroad.

It may be argued that in the past the Israel was defeated and destroyed because it had abandoned Torah and was corrupt and decadent. I agree that a high moral standard and Torah study is necessary for our survival. But in the past it was considered possible to combine study and fighting. Why not now that there are proportionally more yeshivah students per capita amongst the Jewish people than ever before? And many of them are only in yeshivah because of social pressure, rather than a passionate desire to study. Can it be that some yeshivahs are only insisting on keeping everyone full-time because if some of their students go into the army they will get reduced subsidies? Perish the thought.

You may be told that the Israeli army is the agent of a secular anti-religious state. There was indeed a time when the Israeli army was not very hospitable to religious Jews, but that is hardly the case nowadays with an

effective army rabbinate and top generals wearing kipot. Perhaps many Charedi youths being exposed to the outside world (and not just in an airplane journey from Tel Avi to New York) might be so cataclysmically shocked as to impair their mental states for the rest of their lives. Chabad has always sent a large number of young men into the army and they have not lost it. Over the years a significant number of young Haredi men have served in the army, despite the disapproval of their rabbis, and there is no evidence that they have been adversely affected. There has actually been a system in place for many years in which young men could combine the army with yeshivah study.

Another argument is that this is really an evil plan to get young Haredi men to learn how to earn a living. Why is that such bad thing? Others argue that threatening punishment for those who evade the draft is discrimination. But it could only be if it were not applied equally to anyone who evaded the draft regardless of religious proclivities.

There may in fact be a lot wrong with the bill. But the Haredi camp refused to negotiate altogether. They refused earlier attempts at compromise, like the Tal Law. What is it that has so convinced their leadership that compromise is a sin? How does one explain the total refusal to even sit down and negotiate? Or the pathetic claim that this a Nazi-like genocide against poor defenseless young men? I expect rabid anti-Semites or lunatics to say such rubbish.

There are I think two reasons for this extreme refusal to compromise or negotiate. Neither is legitimate. One is the historical tension between the Haredi and the Secular. Once there were indeed grounds. I well recall the antagonisms of the 1950s, when obstacles were put in the way of religious communities and all secular political doors were slammed in their faces. But that is long gone on a governmental level.

The other is the increasing extremism and influence of anti-Zionist Messianic ideology. The mood amongst many (not all) Haredi communities around the world has been getting increasingly extreme. Whereas the grandfather of the present Vishnitzer Rebbe was very supportive of Israel and actually sent groups of young men into the army. His son no longer did. The grandson, who spent time in exile with his extreme uncle in Monsey, has become blindly antagonistic. Even the Belzer, once pro-Israel, has now threatened to take his Chasidim to the USA (as if a hundred thousand Jews in welfare are going to be welcomed).

It has become a religious principle to become more extreme and a political game to say "no". So naturally, the secular ask why they should support and indulge those who refuse to share the burdens of the state. That is how Israeli politics gets so polarized.

The trump card is the dogma that the "Great Ones," an oligarchy of outstanding rabbinic scholars (and no small number of rabbis who simply succeeded their fathers) have decided and they know best and we must just obey. In principle I do not disagree. But experts can also be wrong. And Judaism does believe in personal responsibility. I wonder if those who were alive in 1938 when "the Great Ones" almost to a man declared that it was

safer to stay in Eastern Europe than leave, should have listened to them then!

And I cannot see how we can possibly negotiate with the Palestinians when we cannot even negotiate with ourselves!!