

Does the IDF Code of Ethics Represent Torah Values?

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The IDF's code of ethics, known as "*Ruach Tzahal - Spirit of the IDF*," was compiled in 1994 by a committee chaired by Asa Kasher. In 2000, Brigadier General Elazar Stern, then the Chief Education Officer, led another committee composed of professors of Philosophy of Ethics to revise the first version. The manifest is divided into four fundamental values: Defense of the State of Israel and its residents, Patriotism and loyalty to Israel, Human Dignity, and Statehood. There are ten values derived from these fundamental values: Perseverance in the Mission and Pursuit of Victory, Responsibility, Reliability and Trustworthiness, Personal Example, Human Life, Purity of Arms, Professionalism, Discipline, Camaraderie, and a Sense of Mission. In the original document, these values are in alphabetical order except for the first value, considered the most essential of any army - victory!

The first draft generated much controversy from those who claimed that the Ethical Code had no trace of any Jewish or Zionist substance. As a result of this criticism, the fundamental value of **Patriotism and loyalty to Israel** (*ahavat haMoledet veNe'emanut laMedina*) was added as a fundamental value. A more "Jewish" translation would use "Love of the Homeland" instead of the *parve* word "patriotism" used in the IDF's official translation. The second version also included four sources of inspiration for the Code, one being "The tradition of the Jewish people throughout their history," which precedes the fourth source, "Universal moral values based on the value and dignity of human life."

Controversy continued after the second version. Opponents of the second version claimed that most of the authors, especially Asa Kasher, are identified with the extreme left of the Israeli political spectrum. Many of the committee members were on record justifying their refusal to serve in the IDF as a morally valid method of political protest. The opponents claim there is a need for a different, more Jewish creed that better represents the fighting spirit of soldiers who fought in the Swords of Iron War and were faced with exceptional ethical challenges in a prolonged war in an urban theater of operations against a sub-conventional terrorist army.

In the current social climate, trying to change the code of ethics would be a mistake. But I also believe that changes are not necessary. A deeper look reveals terms that carry great significance in Jewish thought.

The first value, “Perseverance in the Mission and Pursuit of Victory,” is a translation of *deveikut ba’mesima ve’chatira l’nitzachon*. The word *deveikut* is translated as perseverance, which does not capture its meaning. *Deveikut* epitomizes the most profound connection between a man and his wife (Bereishit 2:24) and the aspiration to have the same relationship with G-d (Devarim 13:18). The *Tanya* describes it as “the cleaving of spirit to spirit – the ultimate attachment and union as a result of love” (*Iggeret HaTeshuva* 9). *Nitzachon*, Hebrew for “victory,” also derives from *netzach*, “eternity.”

This value teaches two key lessons for modern warfare: Fighting spirit matters more than technology and weapons, particularly against enemies who spread fear and doubt. Additionally, mission planning must focus on *netzach*, on eternal objectives, rather than short-term gains.

The final value, *Shlichut*, goes deeper than its translations of “sense of mission,” “loyalty,” or “representativeness.” In Jewish thought, *shlichut* describes a relationship between an emissary (*shaliach*) and their sender (*meshalaiach*). When I ask soldiers “Who is your sender?” their answers vary: active personnel typically name their commanding officer, while reservists say “my country.” I suggest a broader view: our sender is our nation across all generations – past, present, and future. While soldiers do take orders from commanders and the IDF follows government directives, the Jewish concept of *shlichut* sees the emissary as the “extended hand” (*yada arichta*) of the sender. This creates a more profound connection than the U.S. Army’s concept of “selfless service.”

I’ve analyzed many IDF values rooted in Jewish thought beyond the examples discussed above. While a full analysis of each value exceeds this article’s scope, consider the value “Purity of Arms” (*Tohar haNeshek*). This phrase appears contradictory in Jewish thought, which is why I prefer the traditional rabbinic term “Holiness of the Camp” (*Kedushat haMachaneh*).

This discussion extends beyond theory. While most After-Action Reviews focus on technical and operational aspects, I use the IDF values (*Erkei Tzahal*) to evaluate

the ethical and behavioral dimensions – what Jewish tradition calls *middot* – of military operations. Understanding these values through their Jewish context elevates soldiers beyond mere tactical considerations, fostering a deeper sense of purpose and resilience.

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