

Haredi draft ideology debunked

written by David M. Weinberg | 30.06.2024

Tens of millions of words will be spilled in newspapers and community rag sheets for and against the military draft of ultra-Orthodox men (haredi yeshiva boys), in response to this week's Supreme Court decision mandating their draft.

I am not going to add to the scuttlebutt because I have exhausted myself over three decades writing about solutions (moderate solutions, I think) for patient integration of the haredi community in Israeli academy and economy and for a soft, slow draft of haredi men into the IDF and/or home front defense and rescue units and/or national service in civilian frameworks specially attuned to their religious/social mores.

Alas, I have reached the conclusion that no solution is in the offing. Despite October 7, despite the near-existential threat situation Israel finds itself in across seven fronts, and despite the attendant acute military manpower crisis - haredi leadership is not budging.

Despite the enormous sacrifices in dead and wounded and kidnapped and displaced, and despite financial deprivation and household disruption and emotional trauma experienced by so many Israeli families religious and secular alike - haredi leadership is not budging.

Forget the military draft of the ultra-Orthodox for a moment. How about some concrete expressions of empathy for the sacrifices and burdens carried at this time by the non-haredi Israeli public?

How many haredi leaders of any stream (Lithuanian, Hassidic, Sephardic) have you seen at any one of the many funerals for fallen soldiers on Mt. Herzl? How many significant haredi figures have shown up at soldier shiva houses to pay condolences?

How many significant haredi leaders - and there are so many of them in Jerusalem, admorim ("grand" hassidic rebbes), geonim (halachic geniuses), and gedolim (just "big" rabbinic leaders) - have quietly taken a minyan of their boys late night to daven (pray) at the Mt. Herzl military cemetery? After all, haredim have a thing about davening at the gravesites of tzaddikim (holy people)!

BUT NO. Aside from some extra Tehillim (ritual recital of Psalms in synagogue, as an afterthought), aside from some extra challah bakes, aside from a very few older (30+) haredi men who anyway weren't studying in yeshiva or kollel and who, to abundant and distorting fanfare, drafted into rear army positions (basically working in their civilian fields but within the military framework) - the haredi community isn't budging.

The haredi world is overwhelmingly cut-off from the war reality that "mainstream" Israel is living, purposefully and devastatingly so.

I am no longer sure that this can be changed, even if the most drastic punitive measures were applied (and they won't be) - like a complete cut-off of government funding for everything haredi, from schools that don't teach basic secular subjects, to yeshivas that don't encourage national service, to the massive subsidies that kollel families enjoy in municipal taxes, health insurance, daycare and more.

I have reached the conclusion that the average haredi adult is a tinok shnishba bein haGedolim, a baby held hostage (mollycoddled) by the "great" leaders of the haredi rabbinic world. (This is a play on words. Haredi leaders somewhat forgivingly but mostly superciliously often refer to secular Jews as "babies held hostage by non-Jews and non-Jewish culture.")

So I don't see solutions on the horizon for the current constitutional, political, and social crisis over haredi draft exemption, even though I believe that there are pathways to a better place in the very long term (along the lines of haredi "hesder" yeshivas - see below).

And perhaps things will change when the current 90-year-old haredi leaders are replaced 50 years from now by today's 40-year-old haredi intellectuals, some of whom are more broad-minded, better educated, and more rooted in Israeli reality. Maybe.

What remains possible, and necessary in this moment, is to defiantly distinguish haredi ideology regarding military service from authentic Torah ideology. To rigorously reject haredi dogma on this matter and debunk haredi distortion of religious sources. To me, doing so is no less an obligation for the sake of the "honor of Torah" than it is an emotional and social imperative.

THERE ARE four pseudo-foundational concepts that haredi ideologues cite in defense of their refusal to participate in “carrying the burden” of military service.

One is that *rabanan lo tzricha netiruta* (Torah scholars do not need protection) because they are protected, I guess, by the heavens. This is a distortion of the meaning of a phrase in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Bava Batra 7b - which doesn't at all refer to wars of defense, but to everyday policing tasks, at most. (See the writings of Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, editor in chief of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, on this.)

Second is a reference to the famous, soaring rhetoric of the Rambam, Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shmita and Yovel 13:2) about the special qualities of the Biblical tribe of Levi, who by priestly service in the Temple - and by inference in devoting itself to Torah study and spiritual matters - is exempt from military draft.

Of course, Maimonides' paean to religious and spiritual types is beautiful, but it was written as *aggada* (homily), not *halacha* (binding religious law). And who says that *haredim*, all *haredim*, are automatically “Levites”?

Third, is the aphorism that *Torah magna umatzla*, Torah protects and saves (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sotah 21a). That all one needs for protection from the Jewish people's enemies is a spiritual effort, whether through religious observance, charity, or study.

The modern haredi interpretation/distortion of this phrase is that students in *yeshiva* are operating “spiritual drones” that quite literally determine the fate of military campaigns more than soldiers on the battlefield.

Obviously, this is not at all what the Talmud meant. It is poppycock on so many levels, beginning with the fact that when haredi people get sick, they go to the doctor or the hospital in addition to praying or giving charity. The same principle applies on the national level.

Moreover, even if one accepts the concept that Torah study is a critical component of the Jewish people's soul and purpose in life (- I do!), and that Torah study indeed “protects and saves” - who says that the Torah study of haredi 20-year-olds (who should be doing some national or military service) is a *sine-qua-non* necessity for heavenly cover? Might the Torah study of haredi kids or 45-

year-old adults be sufficient and more welcome in the heavens?

Might it be that the 15 minutes a day of Torah study, squeezed-in between guard duty or combat sessions of my “Torah-true” religious sons in the IDF, is the Torah study that actually provides Israel with the protections of the heavens (and perhaps much more so)?!

FOURTH, is the concept of Teivat Noah (Noah’s Ark), that the haredi community writ-large is the Jewish people’s protected oasis of purity and morality, something that must be preserved for the overall good of Israel.

Haredi society is indeed an oasis of kindness and commitment, but maintenance of this oasis involves rejection of general education and gainful employment, disconnection from the secular public and the Zionist state (including army service), reliance on the dole (whether private charities or government largesse), and much more that is problematic.

The thinking here is so corrupt that it ends up justifying ignorance (of all knowledge outside religious texts), hatred (of other Jews), dishonesty (in business dealings with government), and abject poverty (which brings with it so many social ills).

As the undisputed Torah “giant” of his time, the Netziv of Volzhin, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), wrote in his introduction to the book of Genesis: “God is honest and straight, and does not tolerate esoteric tzaddikim, holier-than-thou types, but rather prefers holy people who also walk righteously in everyday matters of the world, and who do not act in distorted fashion even though their intentions are for the sake of heaven. Because the latter bring about the destruction of creation and devastation of civilization.”

As for (justifiable) haredi concerns about the fact that military service at a young age would expose their youth to the possibilities of other ways of life and could erode the unique identity characteristics of future generations of haredim - well, yes, but deal with it!

Had haredi leaders been granted more wisdom from the heavens, they would long ago have founded their own hesder yeshivas (which combine Torah study with army service in special conditions) and saved themselves and the country a lot of heartache.

THE LATE, great Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, dean of the Har Etzion hesder yeshiva (who also received the Israel Prize for Torah scholarship), wrote 40 years ago that, “Hesder at its finest seeks to attract and develop men who are profoundly motivated by the desire to become serious Torah scholars but who concurrently feel morally and religiously bound to help defend their people and their country; who, given the historical exigencies of their time and place, regard this dual commitment as both a privilege and a duty; who, in comparison with their non-hesder confreres, love not Torah less but Israel more.

“Hesder provides a context within which students can focus upon enhancing their personal spiritual and intellectual growth while yet heeding the call to public service. It thus enables them to maintain an integrated Jewish existence, despite the conflict of values, lifestyle, and sensibility between bet midrash (Torah study hall) and boot camp, especially in a predominantly secular army,” he said.

“The halachic rationale for hesder rests upon the simple need for physical survival and the fact that military service is often the fullest manifestation of gemilut hasadim, the empathetic concern for others and action on their behalf, which is one of the three cardinal foundations of the world, and is the basis of Jewish social ethics. Its realization, even at some cost to single-minded development of Torah scholarship, is virtually imperative,” Lichtenstein said.

“In contemporary Israel, the greatest single hesed, good deed, one can perform is helping to defend his fellows’ very lives. And it is inspiring to behold.” May we behold such haredi hesed soon.

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