

## Why Don't They Serve in the Army of the Jewish State?

Eliad Eliyahu Ben Shushan

David Ben Guriyon, the first prime minister of Israel, was the first one to allow yeshiva students -Haredim - who study Torah full-time as a vocation (TORATO -OMANUTO) to postpone their military service in the IDF. The reason he gave was that because of the horrible Holocaust, almost all the yeshivas in Europe were extinct and the new State of Israel must allow these yeshiva students to postpone their military service in order to revive the Torah and the Israeli heritage. At that time only 400 postponed their IDF military service. The number rose from one year to the next.

This is a very controversial issue in Israel and key to religious relations. Several attempts were made to change the practice, notably the establishment of the Tal Committee in 1999. Based on the committee's recommendation, the Tal Law was passed in 2002. The law continued the exemption to yeshiva students; however, at age 22 students are to choose between one year of national service alongside a paying job or a shortened 16 month military service. The Tal Law was later declared unconstitutional in its current form, and a new law is needed.

The question of serving in the army has gained a greater focus recently due to the death last month of Rabbi Ovadia Yossef. Rabbi Yossef, who served as the Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Israel and founder of the ultra-Orthodox Shas political party, had a huge influence on Israeli political life. He used all of his power to keep the law of postponing the military service for Haredim intact. His death could usher in a new period in the political-religious relationship in Israel.

While large numbers of Haredim do not serve in the IDF, other groups of Haredim have begun to serve in unique units. These groups try to combine their religious life with the mitzvah of serving the country. Groups like "Hachal Haredim," "Shachar Kachol," or "Netzach Yehuda" are a few examples of these new units. For me as someone who was raised Akko – which I like to call "the microcosm of Israel" – I often remember from my childhood how important it is to have a meaningful army service. I learned and got excited about many stories of soldiers and commanders in the IDF. Many became heroes of Israel and represent with pride the Israeli heritage. But still the Haredim groups can sit with you over dinner and give their reasons why it is so important for them and for Israel to learn Torah instead of serving.

Three weeks ago the Center for Jewish Life created a project, "We Are Family," to express support for Lone Soldiers. Lone Soldiers are those whose families live abroad and who chose to leave their countries of origin to serve the State of Israel. These soldiers know that as the Jewish State, Israel is their home and thus theirs to protect. In this project, Omaha families are pictured holding a sign "We Are Family" which will be sent to support the lone soldiers who serve in the Western Galilee, Omaha's Partnership2Gether region in Israel. This event generated great interest and a desire to participate from other communities of our Partnership Consortium. They are going to do the same activity which emphasizes how the action of serving the land of Israel is so important to all the Jews all around the world.

I believe that the words we put on the sign express everything. "We are family." All of Israeli society, with all of its diversity, is one family. Sometimes family members can disagree with one another and do not talk with one another because of different opinions and points of view. But still we are family. I would like to invite you to participate in this month's session of "Eye on Israel." It is a great opportunity to sit together as a family to agree and disagree on ways Israel has addressed the question of military service over the past 66 years. In reflecting on this issue there is much to learn about other dilemmas in the Israeli society.

On November 12, two sessions of "Eye on Israel" with the same content will be presented. The first will be at noon and the second at 7:30 pm. Both sessions will be in the Kripke Jewish Federation Library and are presented at no charge and are open to the community.

Eye on Israel is presented as part of the Shaliach Program of the Center for Jewish Life whose mission it is to maximize involvement of Omaha's Jewish community in imaginative, compelling and meaningful Jewish experiences.