

SECOND LOOKS

Women in the Israeli Army—For What Purpose?

The role of women in military service in Israel is an old topic, one that featured prominently in the historic struggles between Agudath Israel and the founding fathers of the State, involving public protests, heated exchanges, and a private meeting between the Chazon Ish זצ"ל and Ben Gurion, resulting in a stand-off of sorts for close to thirty years. Exemptions for reasons of religion were granted to girls who succeeded in convincing military review boards of their allegiance to Torah. The reasoning for refusing to serve was, quite simply, that army life for women is in total contradiction to the guidelines of *halacha*, in violation of the constraints of *tzenius*, and—for those insensitive to the former two—contrary to the principles of morality. But with Likud's ascent to power in 1977, this issue has no longer been a major point of contention. From that time onward, a notarized claim to Orthodoxy has been sufficient to win a young woman her exemption.

Yet this should not signal the end of our concern in this matter. Those who have been continuing to serve in the army are also *Yiddishe techter*—Jewish girls. And indeed, late last year, the issue resurfaced to promi-

nence for what may seem to be an odd reason. In 1994, Manpower Branch Commander Yisrael Einhorn told a Knesset panel that the army had 50 percent more female candidates than it needed. Women's compulsory military service, already a year less than men's at 24 months, was decreased in 1992 to 22 months, to 21 months in 1993, and then to 19 months this January—for a while.

No Joy in the Ranks of Feminists

One would have expected a universal outburst of joy among the women of Israel at the prospect of a shorter term of service. But that's not the case. Israeli feminists are looking for more, not fewer, responsibilities in the military, and the 21 months duration of service was restored. Furthermore, one young lady, an *olah* from South Africa, is suing the government to be admitted to an air force pilot training course. She has the skills, she has the brio, and she wants full participation.

One of the reasons for scaling down the length of service for women is that they generally serve in clerical capacities, or as gofers. Much of their activity is being handily replaced by computers. But the women want entry into the power structure of Israeli society, and in Israel the officers' corps interface with the Old Boys Club that dominates in politics, the academe, and other seats of control. Instead of presaging equality, argues professor Damna Israeli of Bar-Ilan University (author of *Women in Israel: Studies of Israeli Society*), the years of army service, with women in subservient positions, actually deepen the gulf between young men and women, preparing them for greater gaps in later civilian life. "The message the female soldier receives is that her job is to free up the men to do the 'real' work. This [attitude] translates into civilian life after the army."

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however, is that experience for women in the army is generally marked by harassment, and worse, from their male colleagues. In an interview with *US News and World Report* (May 22, '95), a veteran of service in the women's corps "bemoaned the ... harassment" that she suffered, adding, "Almost any woman soldier in the Army can tell you about it." In the same article, Col. Gershon Hacohen, one of Israel's most respected armored brigade commanders and hero of the 1973 war, is quoted as saying, with tongue in cheek, that historically men have been in the army to serve as warriors, and women... for the men's diversion. The respected officer's smirk is our collective mark



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of shame.

The entire role of women in the Israeli army should be re-evaluated for reasons beyond our own daughters' welfare to that of the entire nation, in terms that *chilonim* (secularists) can accept: The Army simply does not need the women. Moreover, women in active combat translates into the possibilities of women casualties on the

battlefront, and women in the hands of sadistic captors. Men are instinctively protective of women, and such an incident would hardly be a morale booster among the troops, or figure into the coveted goal for a young woman on the rise.

So—again—why do any women aspire for a more active role in the army? In most cases, to achieve advancement in their *post-army* life. Since obviously this is not working, why don't the feminine activists focus their efforts on breaking through the glass ceiling in civilian life, instead of trying to refashion the army—a man's world, if there ever was one—into a gender-blind landscape?

Moreover, the Army's role as the route of choice for later success in civilian life is no longer as secure as it seems. In a recent article in *The New York Times*, "Israel's Army, Once Sacrosanct, Is Now Becoming Deglamorized" (May 31, 1995), Clyde Haberman reports that "the military is far from the ultimate social empire that it once was...." Because of shifting security needs, and the imminent end of universal conscription, "the army no longer commands center stage." In fact, Yitzhak Galnor, Civil Service Commissioner, is quoted as commenting, "The military profile is still probably the most important indicator on his resume, especially for a young man. But it's not as key as it used to be."

Wouldn't ambitious women be wise to stop focusing their efforts on unyielding terrain, and instead take a page out of the strategy folder of feminists of other countries? Progress in the business and professional worlds, if desired, can be achieved by focusing... on the business and professional worlds.

Ultimately, our own designs for the demographic make-up of the Israeli army should be based on the underlying factor in achieving victory on the battlefield, as is expressed in the *pasuk*: "And your [military] camp shall be holy" (*Devarim* 23, 16). This goal—and that of the women—would certainly be better served with the women remaining in civilian life. It's certainly worth a try.

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