

In the Military We Trust

By Ori Goldberg

One of the most well-known and enduring Israeli songs, “Tomorrow”, ends with the lines: *Tomorrow, when the military takes off its uniform (because war will have become redundant, OG), Our hearts will salute. And then, each person will build. That which he has dreamed today.*

These four lines capture the basic dynamic that is the subject of this essay: In the collective Israeli psyche, the military is perceived as the main vehicle for social and national development, it is that which represents Jewish “*Sabras*” (Jews born in Israel) above anything else, and it is what distinguishes them from Diaspora Jews. The “old Jews”, who lived at the mercy of their Christian and Muslim overlords, were perennial victims, whereas the “new Israeli Jews”, who have taken charge of their destiny, will likely have to pay the price of their newly acquired freedom and be forged in the crucible of war. This crucible is cruel, perhaps even purgatorial, but it is part and parcel of the social contract the “new Jews” have subscribed to. Now, after having attained independence by breaking away from a long history of dependency and persecution, the new challenge (and aspiration) of the Jewish renaissance in Israel is to find peace.

The conception of peace according to the Israeli psyche is significant and not necessarily intuitive; peace is perceived not so much as an ideal state in which trust and good will prevail between former enemies, but rather as a manifestation of enduring stability; a state that is defined ex-negativo vis-à-vis the violent persecutory history of the Jews, meaning peace is a state characterized by the absence of a physical threat towards the Jewish collective, which in turn, can only be guaranteed by the presence of a strong Jewish military.

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Thus, the Israeli military is tasked with the thankless duty of Moses – leading the chosen people across the desert, but never entering the promised land. The Israeli military, unlike most militaries around the world, is a conscript army consisting of almost all different parts of Jewish-Israeli society (except the ultra-orthodox as well as most religious women and those exempted for various official reasons), who undergo a period of compulsory service. Thus, by referring to the “Israeli military”, I do not mean the top command or professional soldiers, but rather the facet of collective and individual life that most Israeli Jews consider to be so natural that it epitomizes “Israeliness”.

The Israeli Military as a Catalyst for Normality

During the first decade of Israel's existence, Jews from all over the world poured into the small, young country. However, class and cultural differences highlighted the fault lines that threatened to undo the entire ambitious, yet precarious social experiment. The military service was the great social mobilizer of the new state; as is the case in other countries around the world, the military takes the new recruits in as a blank slate. Basic training teaches "rookies" that they can be told apart from one another only through recourse to military benchmarks for success and failure. In target practice, navigating an obstacle course or just getting through the day without breaking one of myriad rules, a soldier is judged only on soldiering and not on pre-service actions or affiliations. Friendships and alliances can be formed between unlikely comrades on newly equal footing. Also, bravery in combat can do wonders for your social status in a state under constant threat of war.

The military service was the great social mobilizer of the new state



IDF parade in Jerusalem in 1968- Source: PikiWiki Israel

The military was, in many ways, the fire fueling the Israeli melting pot, however, despite its centrality in Israeli society, Israelis did not tend to think of themselves as Spartans; **in the Israeli psyche, the military has never been praised as an end in itself, but always as a means to an end, an unfortunate necessity.** Israeli Jews told themselves they had to fight because they were under existential threat and that the state's overarching purpose was instrumental, namely to provide a safe haven for all Jews; but what is a haven without safety? Thus, the military service was deemed as the price to pay for the normalization of the Jewish state as another nation among other world nations.

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Indeed, Israel's leading societal narrative was born out of the Zionist Founding Fathers' vision to put an end to what they perceived as the continuous abnormal standing of the Jews worldwide, of a dependent people without its own territory and military. Thus, Israel's Founding Fathers turned the meaning of "Jewish" from

a religious affiliation to a national one. To live like any other nation has always been the chief goal of the Zionist project; while leaders spoke of Israel as a light unto the gentiles, cultural and political debates focused almost exclusively on achieving normality. Haim Nahman Bialik, the national poet, is said to have remarked that the Zionist dream will have been fulfilled only when the Jewish state has its own Jewish whores and Jewish thieves.

Thus, in a somewhat counter-intuitive fashion, going into combat, which evidently constitutes the antithesis of normality, is the price to pay for realizing the great dream of normalized Jewish life in a Jewish nation-state like all other nation-states in the world. By incorporating a conscious, willing exception to the desired rule of normality into Israeli identity, the military, as a facet of Israeli identity serves to underscore the profound national commitment to peace as an expression of stability and normality.

IDF as a Facilitator of Jewish Continuity and Change

The military aspect of the Jewish Israeli identity is a blend of contradictions, such as the tension between innovation and tradition; since the biblical kingdoms of Israel and Judea collapsed, Jewish tradition has hardly been known for its military genius. For many centuries, Diaspora Jews did not enjoy the sovereignty needed for a military to even exist. The establishment of Israel was a radical break with this “civilian” tradition as it was immediately vital to take defensive measures against the coalition of Arab states that invaded Israel in 1948. Less visible but very palpable was the collective post-Holocaust ethos summed up by the phrase “Never again”. Israel saw itself as the panacea to the Jewish condition – the inability of the Jews to live comfortably as a religious minority within another nation.

The state of Israel is the locus of perennial tensions: it begins with the attempt to recreate a new Jewish polity 2000 years after the existence of the previous one while creating a new unified identity for diaspora Jews that were different from one another in every aspect of life, from culture to socio-economic status. The new state of Israel was to be a revival of the ancient past while being an unprecedented experiment at the same time. While the biblical kingdom was a potent historical trope, they left no real foundations or guidance for the creation of a modern Jewish nation-state.

A military manifested the new Jewish sovereignty

The Israeli military is the social and political site upon which these contradictions could coexist; a military manifested the new Jewish sovereignty, which also linked Jewish pioneers and refugees, citizens of numerous countries and denizens of diverse cultures, with their common ancient past; in biblical times, Jews were not averse to fighting. They had a king of their own, a temple in which they worshipped their own God, safe borders and a standing army. The military was also where old Jews were reborn as new ones, generating a national and social transformation.

As suggested above, personal transformation was also part of military service, as those born into poverty or into underdeveloped communities could join an Israeli elite to which they were otherwise denied entry. The military also represented the most essential and immediate concerns of the entire nation; the physical threat was imminent and very real, and this was, in a way, the opposite of the transformation process envisaged by the country’s Founding Fathers, i.e. shifting from a situation of ongoing danger to that of a safe haven for Jewish life. The weight of history and the urgent necessity of the present required conscious resolution.

Turning War into an Anomaly

A further tension manifests itself in the perceived failure to deliver on the promise of the founding fathers to complete the normalization process of the Israeli Jews through the establishment of the Jewish state; despite the yearning for normality and stability, Israel's present was (and is) seen as precarious. It is through military service that the burden of the present is carried and shared. The mandatory years-long military service and its repercussions are the price all Israelis must pay to attain the stability and peace that have been the collective Jewish desire for eons.

The troublesome present exists not only in time, but also in physical space. When, for example, Israeli military actions are criticized for excessive zeal, official spokespersons often respond by noting that, *"Unfortunately, we do not live in the best neighborhood, we are forced to act in keeping with the rules of the Middle East"*, a phrase that reflects the deeply entrenched Israeli Jews' view of their country as a "Villa in a hostile Jungle", referring to their geopolitical reality as a source of profound discomfort and thus as a continuation of the abnormal and regrettable (diaspora) Jewish existence.

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The Jewish state was supposed to represent the future and a closure for the abnormal Jewish situation. However, in the face of the continued perceived sense of danger for the Jewish collective in Israel, the seemingly precarious future continues to play a significant role in the modern Israeli psyche: indeed, unlike the religious Jewish minority in Israel, for which the creation of Israel signaled a time of deliverance and the beginning of a new messianic chapter for the Jewish people, for secular Israeli Jews, Israel was never seen as a part of any divine plan, but rather a means to achieve durable stability and normality for the Jewish collective.

Jewish secularity, a late Enlightenment response to ultra-orthodox traditionalism, has always found it difficult to forego messianic yearning for the future, even without believing in an actual Messiah or in divine redemption. Thus, for secular Israeli Jews, the military is the agent of this future; the IDF is the breeding ground for Israel's "Startup Nation" ethos and personnel. Serving in a technological unit such as 8200 often guarantees a lucrative career in the country's Hi-Tech sector. But the military guarantees more than technological advancement; it is the vehicle of forward motion for the Jewish people on their journey of national revival. The present and the future are most closely intertwined in the military aspect of "Israeliness". Religious and secular Israeli Jews share an implicit acknowledgement of Israel's uniqueness: religious Jews ponder "deliverance" and secular Jews extoll Jewish "rebirth" from the ashes of the Holocaust, but the sentiment is more similar than it is contrasting.

Shaping Peace by Enabling the Impossible

The military is where the most prominent contradictions of Israeli identity receive full expression: Israelis transcend the passively peaceful constraints of Jewish history and are cast as a united nation, successfully downplaying ethnic and economic disparity. Also, the IDF demonstrates Israel's commitment to the international laws of war and occupation, incorporating Israel into the international community despite Israelis' pervading sense of their country's uniqueness. The Israeli air force flies a "missing man" formation over Auschwitz to make the symbolic point that the existence of a Jewish state would have prevented the Holocaust, and to demonstrate its commitment to the defense of Jews worldwide. The military is where Jewish co-religionists come together most intimately as a nation.

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The Israeli understanding of peace is therefore significantly shaped by the military, both as an institution and as a dominant facet of the collective Israeli identity. Peace as an expression of stability (rather than an idyllic renunciation of violence or a pan-Abrahamic love affair) is a volatile matter for Israelis; it is both an aspiration and an exception to the rules of reality. It is considered a core value and a basic motivation, which is yet to be realized. It is not clear what conscious effort is required in order to realize it, perhaps it is not meant to be realized.

What is clear is that the military will need to certify and validate peace if and when the possibility to achieve it presents itself. And so, for Jewish Israelis, it is the military, which enjoys a unique authority as the originator and upholder of the myth that is Israeli reality, and which is consequently viewed as the only legitimate harbinger of peace.