



OBSERVER

The next generation

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Ten years from now, a quarter of all major-generals in the Israel Defense Forces will be wearing a small knitted kippa under their helmets, a sign that they belong to Israel's modern Orthodox community. That's the prediction of Shlomo Gazit, a former head of Israel's military intelligence and a senior researcher at the Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies. If he's correct, it will represent nothing short of a revolution in the makeup of the Jewish state's military leadership.

Almost gone are the days when the military elite is drawn from patriotic and daring secular Israelis hailing from kibbutzim. Increasingly, their place has been taken by those who some see as Israel's last pioneers—modern Orthodox Jews who participate fully in the life of the state, who settled the West Bank and Gaza, and whose politics range from leftist peaceniks to some of the most vociferous opponents of withdrawal from more territory.

If this massive shift occurs it will be, in no small part, due to the effectiveness of *mechinot*, year-long pre-army preparatory yeshivot for religious boys. The 12 mechinot operating today are located chiefly in the West Bank, with a new one opening almost every year. The larger ones, like Azmona in the Gaza Strip and B'nei David in the hills of Judea, have each

COURTESY OF B'NEI DAVID

VANT UNDER FIRE

of Israel's military leaders may well be wearing kippot.

enrolled 160 high school graduates, with the smaller mechinot averaging about 60 students per year.

The 18-year-olds who choose to attend a mechina come from observant homes all over Israel. Their world is that of Orthodoxy in harmony with modernity: They accept the legitimacy of the state; they have attended religious high schools where both secular and religious studies are taught; they will most likely attend university. And while they rigorously follow *halacha* (Jewish law), they do not come from the cloistered world of the black-coated, fur-hatted haredi communities.

The prep yeshiva is designed to strengthen students religiously so they can serve in the toughest combat units, side by side with secular soldiers, and nevertheless remain committed to religious life. B'nei David, the first mechina, has graduated more than a thousand boys during its 11 years in existence. Of the first 500 graduates, 50 percent became officers, as compared to 5 percent in the army at large. Of the initial 700 students at B'nei David, 41 earned pilot's wings or became naval ensigns; 51 served in top commando units, 388 in elite combat units, and 108 in armored or artillery brigades. Eight died in action during their service.

The highest ranking soldier to graduate from a prep yeshiva is now a *rav seren*, the

equivalent of an American major, but the pipeline is filled with others on their way to significant military positions. It is conceivable that 15 or 20 years from now, a religious general, educated in a mechina, will become chief of staff, something unimaginable even five years ago.

That worries Gazit. "The kippa," he says, "is a visible symbol which is not just an expression of observance, but an open political statement which says they have undergone political indoctrination, and that is dangerous. I served for 33 years in the army and I never knew the political thoughts of those above, below, or around me."

Former Defense Minister (now the centrist candidate for Prime Minister) Yitzhak Mordechai has a different view of the 12 preparatory yeshivot that are churning out motivated and effective recruits for the IDF. "Today you go to B'nei David and you see the cream of the youth," he says. "If this program is serving the state and the army and security forces to the maximum, I salute it. It is a model to emulate."

Both Gazit and Mordechai are reacting to a transformation occurring in the social fabric of the Israeli army. "Since about 1987—when B'nei David opened its doors—the kibbutzim started losing their domination of the ranks of elite commando units," says retired Colonel Moshe

Even-Chen, a former chief psychologist for the IDF and an observant Jew. "The General Staff Reconnaissance Unit [*Sayeret Matkal*, famous for its role in the 1976 rescue of the hostages at Entebbe and other daring missions] was the first to be cracked by religious youth. Then came all the rest.

"The ideological [religious] debate in Israeli society was translated into action by the religious camp. They said the media were against them so they went into it, and today you find more observant Jews in communication. The same thing happened with the IDF," says Even-Chen. "They asked themselves why there were no observant pilots or commandos or combat officers and they decided to fight for acceptance in places that had been closed to them."

The 120 young men at B'nei David, located in the small religious community of Eli on the West Bank, wake at dawn to begin another day of preparation for their induction into the IDF. Prayer is the first morning activity—not jogging.

Here, in programs that teach boys how to behave as soldiers, the primary text is not *The Art of War* but *Sparks of Spirituality*, by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, leader of Orthodox Zionism until his death in 1935. "With all our nation's preoccupation with spirituality," he wrote,

"we have forgotten our bodies, we have left the life of action and deeds. We ignored the health of the flesh ... a passionate soul needs to be connected to a strong developed muscular body."

"Your standard yeshiva teaches only Talmud," says Rabbi Eli Sadan, co-director of B'nei David. "Half our day is dedicated to studying faith: Why be religious? We also have twice the teacher-to-student ratio that other yeshivas have. Since we have the students only for a year, we feel we need to give them special attention." Although the program in Eli is 100 percent Orthodox and insulated from secular influences, Sadan says, "We prepare our boys to be familiar with, and respect, the secular; to bridge the gap and integrate into a secular environment, all the while remaining strong in their faith."

On this issue Rabbi Kook wrote: "There are those in the state [of Israel] who carry the flag of complete separation between the religious and the secular and there are others who think that toleration and unity should reign. This is similar to the two prostitutes who came before King Solomon [disputing possession of a baby each claimed as hers]: One accepted his decision to cut the baby in half; the other decided to keep the baby whole by giving him to the other woman. God calls out: 'Give the live child to [the latter].' There is no end," Kook concluded, "to the physical and spiritual evil brought about by dividing the nation."

The late Bible teacher Nehama Leibowitz heard some years ago that one of the leading Orthodox yeshivot would allow their outstanding students to postpone army service for three years. Characteristically blunt, the revered teacher admonished the director of the yeshiva that while university deferments for exceptional students were acceptable because the purpose of universities is to develop intellectual capabilities, yeshiva deferments were unacceptable. "The yeshiva," Leibowitz said, "wants to build a fully integrated Jewish personality who can be a model for society, and it is for this reason that yeshiva students should be the first ones ready for army service."

"But the eligible Orthodox Jews in Israeli society have never been properly represented in the army," laments Rabbi Sadan. "They don't go because they fear losing their religiosity," a fear borne out by the common experience of young Orthodox Israelis who enter the army observant and

come out secular.

The ultra-Orthodox have avoided this problem. Since the beginning of the State of Israel, they have found sanctuary in never-ending religious deferments for yeshiva study. In contrast, modern Orthodox boys, who seek to combine strict observance with a full secular life, have chosen to do army service in the regular army or in so-called Hesder programs. Alternating periods of yeshiva study and military service over five years, Hesder effectively cuts the standard three years of army duty in half. Moreover, Hesder soldiers typically serve in self-contained units, composed solely of religious soldiers, but sometimes commanded by non-religious officers.

Now, the Hesder military compromise is being questioned by many religious teenagers. "Although the number of Hesder yeshivot has increased, registration in Hesder is declining," says Bar-Ilan University professor of political studies Stuart Cohen. "But registration in the religious mechinot is increasing markedly." A growing trend, stemming more from pride than guilt, leads religious youth to serve the full three years. They see army service as a national and even religious obligation. But before they grab a gun they feel they need to load up with spiritual ammunition.

"I didn't want Hesder because I believe if you're going to do something you should do it all the way. If army, then army; if yeshiva, then yeshiva," says 24-year-old Efraim Geller, a resident of the Golan Heights. "But I didn't feel I learned enough about Judaism in my yeshiva high school to enter the secular world of the army. The songs of Aviv Gefen [a young Israeli rock icon] ask the questions: Why be human? Why live? But he doesn't answer them. I went to the prep yeshiva to answer those questions and others: Why be religious? Why observe the strict rules of Shabbat?"

If wearing a kippa is an emblem of religious faith and practice, then, according to Rabbi Sadan of B'nei David, preparatory yeshivot are quite successful. "A recent survey shows that about 50 percent of religious boys take off their kippa in the army and don't put it back on when they're released. Only three percent of our graduates" take off their kippa, says Rabbi Sadan.

What influences young men to adhere to religious observance when soldiers all around them ignore Shabbat, eat whatever comes their way, have girlfriends with

whom sexual relations are frank and obvious? "Besides the writings of Rabbi Kook, a lot of lectures deal with challenges that a religious soldier might face," says 19-year-old Moni Maatuk, a student at B'nei David. "Let's say the unit is in downtown Tel Aviv one night and they go to a bar and then afterwards cruise. We're not told what to do, we just review the issues."

Twenty-year-old Erez Chen, from Ein Tsurim, a religious kibbutz, recently finished the pre-army mechina in Azmona. "For me it wasn't so much the discussions in the mechina that made the difference, but the atmosphere. I was free to do what I want. In fact, I didn't go to prayer for the first six months and no one said a thing. They give you personal responsibility that builds you and gives you the confidence to remain observant on your own, even though the surrounding environment is doing just the opposite."

"Learning about objective morality and how the Jews have a responsibility to be a light unto the nations stirred something inside of me," Erez continued. "But there was no sudden revelation or drastic change in my life style. My strengthening religious commitment came gradually over the year. And my motivation to be religious does not detract from my motivation for the military. I plan to become an officer."

Erez's three older siblings were observant when they entered the army and today are not. "From my experience with my family I was skeptical the prep yeshiva would have a positive impact on me. I went in with no expectations. But I also went in thinking that at least I should make my religious commitment, or lack of it, a conscious decision."


Sometimes teachers, not texts, most influence the boys. Occasionally, 35-year-old ex-paratrooper and instructor Rabbi Carmi Ben-Yosef breaks from teaching and takes the class out for a run. His student, Maatuk, doesn't "always accept what I'm taught, but when you see how the rabbis act and their personal dedication to us—that makes quite an impression."

But Gazit is not so sure prep yeshivot benefit Israeli society. "There is grave uncertainty," he warns, "about whose orders [Orthodox soldiers] will follow, those of the IDF or some rabbi. They say they are loyal to the IDF, but I don't know who they will follow when a moment of decision comes. I don't see this as an immediate danger, but it will be a decade from now."

Cohen, who has studied and written extensively on the IDF for the BESA Institute, a policy research center, stresses that the problem of dual authority for the graduates of the mechinot is “very, very latent. In some army situations, some boys may refer back to their teachers, as others in the army refer back to parents and youth leaders.”

Until today, none of the mechina yeshiva heads have called for soldiers to disobey orders in the event, for instance, that a settlement must be evacuated, an issue more problematic for many religious Israelis than for centrist or left-wing secular citizens. Nevertheless, Gazit’s concern is not his alone. Dr. Reuven Gal, head of the Carmel Institute for military and social studies and chief IDF psychologist from 1976 to 1982, says the “overmotivation” of Orthodox soldiers is dangerous because it is selective. Several heads of [regular, not mechina] yeshivas have openly declared that Orthodox soldiers should refuse orders to vacate settlements,” Gal points out. “It is unacceptable to the military to have two sources of discipline. The IDF has traditionally been a people’s army... my worry is that this equilibrium will be changed, and not necessarily due to demographics, but because of some political biases.”

When asked if he would evacuate a Jewish settlement on orders, officer Amir Sadan, a B’nei David graduate who just finished service as head of a commando unit, dodges the question as he would a bullet. “I’ve never been asked to do so. But I will tell you, a secular soldier from North Tel Aviv also refuses orders that transgress his personal morals,” a comment borne out by the hundreds of soldiers who have gone to prison for refusing to serve in the territories since the intifadah began a decade ago.

Drafting haredi youth, who today sit in yeshivot from morning to night, seems just and overdue. But in fact, most are physically and mentally unprepared for army service and the army itself is hard put to use these less-than-qualified young men. The prep yeshivot, on the other hand, despite any reservations raised about them, are preparing dedicated and skillful men, ready to tackle the most difficult tasks of a modern army. And, as the pool of those willing to remain in the IDF as officers continues to shrink, there is no sign that the Israel of the future will not need every mechinot graduate. 

The Other Orthodox

In contrast to the modern Orthodox men with their knitted kippot, modern dress, and dedication to military service, young ultra-Orthodox men, known in



Another time: Haredim defend Israel in 1948.

Israel as *haredim*, commonly don’t serve in the army. Instead, about 30,000 study Talmud full time, mostly at government expense. Technically, they receive military deferments, but in effect they are exemptions, lasting long enough for the early-marrying haredim to

escape service altogether once they’ve become husbands and fathers.

Resentment over these mass exemptions has been growing among Israel’s secular majority. Last December, Israel’s Supreme Court declared the system illegal. The court gave the government until December 1999 to pass legislation regulating exemptions. Failure to do so will automatically cancel the long-standing arrangement.

It wasn’t always this way. In the desperate days after May 1948, when the new state marshaled all its meager physical and human resources to repel the Arab invasion, everyone—men, women, religious, secular—fought side by side to survive. Only an insignificant number refused to serve—primarily haredim who rejected a Jewish state created by human determination and not the Messiah’s arrival.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, then granted 400 army deferments to the survivors of European yeshivot, most of whose students had perished in the Holocaust. In 1975 the number rose to 800. Two years later, with the election of the Likud leader Menachem Begin as prime minister and the growing importance of the haredi political parties as coalition partners, the limits were lifted. Within 10 years, deferments exploded to 18,000. Today that number has nearly doubled. —RB