In recent days, the well-known debate has flared up again in Israel about the military service of strictly orthodox citizens of Charedi society and their shunning of it. The roots of today's reality lie in the founding of Israel, when head of state David Ben Gurion exempted a then small number of Haredi Talmud students from military service. This clause was based on the Talmudic expression "torato omanuto", meaning "his profession is the Torah" (Shabbat 11a). The problem is that the number of strictly orthodox men who were exempted from military service in this way amounted to 400 yeshiva students in 1948, but due to demographic changes in Israel it has since grown to around 60,000!



Young "Charedim" (God-fearers) at the Wailing Wall © PhotoStock-Israel Alamy Stock Foto

This reality, in which 18 percent (!) of men fit for military service avoid compulsory military service behind the argument of studying Talmud, is simply unacceptable. This is all the more true after October 7. In the current war, the need for a larger, broader-based Israeli army has become clearly visible. Israel simply can no longer afford such a huge number of military shirkers.

This reality is not only a moral problem, but also a religious one. Moshe already

criticized the tribe of Reuben when they wanted to settle outside the Promised Land, beyond the Jordan River: “Shall your brothers go to war, and you will stay here?” (4. B. M. 32:6). The Haredi side likes to argue with the Talmudic principle that Torah study creates a metaphysical protection: “When one deals with the commandment, it protects and saves” (Sota 21a). Even if this were true, it is an irrational and therefore irrelevant argument for a modern state. It is also dishonest. The popular Zionist rabbi Chaim Nawon says: “If a charedi yeshiva student has a sick child, he does not limit himself to learning a Talmud page, but takes it to the hospital, and if necessary, to a distant country. Why can’t he close his Talmud book for a year or two when the whole Jewish people are ill, as the heroes of the Zionist Hesder Yeshivot do?” Nawon’s tone becomes even harsher on the matter: “It’s true, Haredim volunteer for service with ZAKA (a charitable organization for identifying casualties after terrorist attacks or accidents; editor’s note), but we never agreed to a deal whereby we die in war and they count our corpses. Let them be good enough to join the ranks of the fighters.” It should be added that a war in the Holy Land to “rescue Israel from the hand of an oppressor who has invaded it” (Rambam) is, according to the Halacha, expressly a “milchemet mitzvah”, a “commanded war”, which obligates all Jewish men and women according to religious law.

On the other hand, the argument that Talmudic geniuses deserve exemption from military service just as much as exceptional athletes also makes sense. A core of serious yeshiva scholars should remain untouched in the Jewish state. First of all, those young men in Charedi society who are not so serious about Torah studies should enlist, and unfortunately there are quite a few of them. Which military unit should they be integrated into? Using the platform of the army to forcibly secularize one’s fellow Haredi citizens cannot and must not be the imperative of the Jewish state, just as modern Jewish people would vehemently and rightly reject religious coercion on the part of strictly Orthodox Jews. This is entirely in the spirit of Hillel’s Talmudic guideline: “Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you” (Shabbat 31a). Tolerant liberalism does not mean changing other, patriarchal, more conservative societies by force, but rather creating conditions that encourage them to integrate to a certain extent into modern majority society. Any change to the Charedi way of life must come from within, otherwise it will not last. In practice, this means creating homogeneous divisions in the Israeli army that are “charedim-friendly”, for example through longer prayer times and a higher standard of kashrut, or by not having their troops trained by female soldiers, as is sometimes the case in other combat units.

The time has come for our Haredi brothers to actively join in the defense of Israel. On the other hand, the State of Israel is also called upon to create a framework in the IDF in which strictly orthodox men can feel comfortable and develop. This requires a pinch of good will. On all sides.

*Haredim” (God-fearers)

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