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My Son, the Tank Driver

By Chana Bracha Siegelbaum



You wrote that Meir will soon be stationed in Aza. We could not find Aza on the map. We wonder if Aza is in Gaza. Is it? We hope not.

Such e-mails from my in-laws in the United States were common last year, when my son Meir served as a tank driver in the Israeli army.

For fourteen and a half years until his brother was born, Meir was our only child. We put all our energy into his education. How proud we were when he did so well in *cheder*! We thought of the words of *Chazal*: “One thousand go in [to the yeshivah], but only one [*posek* (halachic decisor)] comes out.” We secretly hoped that Meir would be the one.

Meir’s grandparents jokingly predicted that just like my husband had disappointed them by turning his back on their secular lifestyle, the same may very well happen to us. “Just wait and see,”

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they said. “Meir may very well find his own way and abandon your religious path.”

I remembered their words when Meir received his first *tzav* (command note) from the army. At the yeshivah Meir attended, some of the students choose to continue learning, while the majority choose the *hesder* track, which sandwiches army service between periods of yeshivah study. Yet most of my friends did not send their sons to the army, and took advantage of the exemption for yeshivah students.

Panicked, I called my friend Sarah. “Meir has to appear for an assessment meeting,” I began.

“Oh, don’t worry!” said Sarah. “All you need is a letter from the yeshivah stating that he is a full-time student. Then they won’t bother him again.”

“Yes I know,” I retorted.

But something was bothering me. When I envisioned the danger facing the young soldiers, something inside of me contracted out of fear. I suddenly felt an invisible bond with all the mothers in Israel who have to sacrifice the safety of their sons for the safety of our people. *Why should other mothers have to go*

through this frightening ordeal, while I excuse myself? I thought. *Why am I better than thou?* Keenly aware of the split between the *chilonim* (irreligious Jews) and the *datiim* (religious Jews), I had always wanted to build bridges. However, only when I was facing my son’s potential army recruitment did I truly understand the controversy over the army exemption for yeshivah students. My fear made it clear to me why this issue continues to deepen the split between religious and irreligious Jews in Israel.

“I’m just not sure it’s right,” I said.

Was it right to care only about my son’s physical and spiritual safety?

“Are you kidding?” asked Sarah. “Do you want to pull your son away from Torah learning and put him in a *hefker* [immoral] environment? The food too—do you really think you could trust the *kashrus* in the army?”

I certainly was concerned. I didn’t want Meir to become lax in his mitzvah observance. *But isn’t it a mitzvah to*

defend our people against the Arabs whose goal is to push all the Jews into the sea? I thought. *Didn’t Rambam write that defending the lives of Jews is considered a milchemet mitzvah (obligatory war), and that even a bride straight from her chupah must join?*

I knew there was no use sharing this information with Sarah. She would surely reply that there cannot be a

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milchemet mitzvah as long as our government remains secular.

“There are enough guys who want to be soldiers and fight our physical wars,” said Sarah, whose five boys were in yeshivah. “The yeshivah students are also soldiers; they fight our spiritual wars.”

But wasn’t it possible to both learn Torah and defend our country? I thought.

“Didn’t Yehoshua select the most learned men to fight the wars and conquer the Land from the seven nations?” I asked.

“Those were completely different times, when we had a Torah army and when God revealed Himself to the people,” said Sarah.

Sarah was, of course, right; times surely had changed. Our government was neither led by prophets nor Torah sages.

Decades earlier, I had come to Israel—a secular teenager straight out of high school—and immediately fell in love with the country. It didn’t take long before I met my husband and embraced the Torah lifestyle. Would I have returned to Torah in any other place? Would I have come to Israel had it not

been in Jewish hands with a Jewish army to protect me? Was it right to care only about my son’s physical and spiritual safety? Aren’t all Jews one big family?

I was not much older than the kids in today’s army when I first came to Israel; the people I met in the women’s seminary I attended completely changed my life. During one’s impressionable years, it is most crucial to be exposed to people who can have a positive influence. Why should secular soldiers not be exposed to the influence of religious young men with ideals?

In the end, however, the decision was not up to me. One day Meir simply informed my husband and me that he would be joining the army in three months.

“But isn’t your learning going so well just now?” I asked. “Couldn’t you postpone going to the army for another few years?”

I already knew the answers to my questions; once my son had made up his mind, there was no going back. There were personal interviews, psychometric tests, physicals and more interviews. To Meir’s great disappointment, because of his strong eyeglass prescription, he did not qualify as a combat soldier. He was devastated at the prospect of having to work in an army office. “If I’m going to the army, I want to do the real thing,” he said, his voice booming. “I don’t want to be just another ‘job-nick’ [derogatory term for those who avoid combat by taking an easy army job].”

“If Meir really wants something, he will get it”—I remembered one of his third-grade teachers saying at a parent/teacher meeting.

After his last assessment meeting, Meir came home excited. “They raised my profile from sixty-four to seventy-two—the number required to be a tank driver!” I was happy for him, and even a little proud of his dedication.

How quickly the army succeeded in teaching Meir things I had struggled to instill in him since he was a child. He learned to make his own bed and put his

dishes in the sink. He learned to polish his boots in ten seconds. In his army barracks, his shoes were in one tidy row while his laundry was neatly tucked under the bed.

He learned the value of unity and teamwork, of the whole being greater than the sum of the individual parts. A team of four soldiers—a commander, gunner, loader and driver—is assigned to each tank. Not only do the team members have to work closely together, they have to work in conjunction with other units (three tanks make up a unit). The success of the entire army is dependent on each soldier.

The year and a half that Meir was in the army seemed to drag on. I watched his interest in Torah gradually fade. While home for Shabbat, instead of looking up answers to halachic questions in the *Mishnah Berurah*, he would lie lazily on the couch, reading newspapers while munching on potato chips. He was no longer interested in learning Gemara with his father, and had difficulty getting up for minyan. At the end of one of his Shabbat visits, I called the *mashgiach* of Meir’s yeshivah.

“I am very concerned about my son,” I explained. “At the beginning of his service, Meir was stationed in a group with other yeshivah boys. But now he is all alone among irreligious boys and girls,

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and the army even separated him from his only *chavruta*.”

“Don’t worry,” said the rabbi. “When the boys return to yeshivah after



the army service, they become even more serious about their Torah learning. You'll see, this will happen to your son as well."

The rabbi proved to be right. As the year wore on, we gleaned genuine *nachat* (pleasure) from our son's performance in the army—not when he hit the bull's eye during rifle practice or when he came in second place running the two-kilometer track meet. We were truly proud of Meir when he was put in detention for singing Shabbat *zemirot* (songs) during guard duty and when he got suspended for being four minutes late to *misdar* (roll call) in order not to rush through Ma'ariv.

We were proud of the way he meticulously kept the *mitzvot*. Because of the principle of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life takes precedence over most other *mitzvot*), soldiers are permitted to engage in patrols during Shabbat. Yet Meir refused to polish the tank or tighten its bolts at the end of his Shabbat patrols.

As a new recruit, Meir had last pick when it came to vacations and ended up having to spend Purim at an army station near the Jordanian border. He read the Megillah aloud for himself and a friend. Afterwards, the two of them shared a *lechayim* at their own Purim party. Meir has told me it was one of the most meaningful Purims he has ever celebrated.

Serving in the army has helped build Meir's character by giving him true life experience that he could not have gotten had he remained in yeshivah. The one-year break proved to be refreshing and probably helped prevent the all-too-common phenomenon of yeshivah burnout. When Meir completed his army service, he wholeheartedly threw himself back into learning. Having risked his life to defend Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael, Meir's learning is now real rather than theoretical.

Perhaps we have been lucky. Not every boy entering the army emerges with his faith intact. Of course, there is no guarantee that anyone will remain *frum*, even boys who remain in yeshivah and don't go to the army. Everything in life is a risk; ultimately every person has to make his own decision about which risks are worth taking. **JA**

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