

Having a Son in the Israel Army

I have spoken the past two shabbatot about my recent trip to Israel, describing first my overall impressions and assessment of the current situation, and then last week reporting on the studies at the Hartman Institute.

A number of members have inquired about how Ezra, my son is doing. The good wishes, prayers and concern expressed by all of you have enhanced our sense of being an extended family. It is in that spirit that I share with you, the members of my family, word of how he is doing.

It was an image which I must confess too some getting used to. The last time I saw my son in soldier's uniform, he was much younger, and it wasn't real. Consequently, there was an element of disbelief when my 23-year-old son, Ezra, met me, wearing his army uniform and carrying an M-16 rifle. When I mentioned this to my aunt the other day, she asked, "Does he know how to use it?"

In light of all the attacks on Israel and Israelis, he decided that he has an obligation as a young Jew to serve his people by defending them. He told me not everyone understands why he is going what he is doing. He said "some think I am meshugeh, and some are extremely appreciative, but not everyone understands that I am doing this because of my commitment to defend the Jewish people." He wrote in an essay explaining his decision, "Few things in life are worth living for. Israel is one of them."

Despite initially being turned away he persisted and appealed, all the way to Israel's attorney general to receive permission to join the army, where he has been in basic training for the last number of months.

So what did I learn from my son, and what is it like to have a child serve in the military?

Despite the ongoing worry, how can a parent be upset with a child who makes such a critical decision based on the very values he has learned at home? Needless to say, there have been some sleepless nights, accompanied by a great deal of anxiety and concern, but those feelings are generally overcome by a sense of pride and admiration for his courage and conviction. When invited to speak to our seventh graders recently about my heroes, I added my son to a list that already included Harry Truman, Bobby Kennedy and Moses.

First of all, you should know, he looks great and has a great attitude and sense of humor. He is happy and proud to be doing what he is doing. He is appropriately cautious, warning me to stay away from certain areas. He told me how he made eye contact with three other soldiers as he was on a bus, on his way to see me, and there was a suspicious looking, fidgety Arab man on the bus a few seats away from him.

Ezra told me of the sense of pride he has knowing that he is making this commitment on behalf of the Jewish people. He described the image one day of marching with the other young men in his platoon and being cheered on by Israelis passing by on the road, waving their flags. It was, he said, inspiring, as he called it, “a Zionist moment.”

As a soldier without parents or immediate family in the country, he is classified as a “hayal boded”, a lonely soldier. The Israeli army looks out especially for these young men. On the day when parents are invited to come visit their children at the base, the lonely soldiers are personally visited by a top general. At a swearing in ceremony, attended by family members, he was presented with a special package of candies from the government of Israel on behalf of the people of Israel, so he would not feel alone or isolated.

I want to tell you a little something about what he told me, the kinds of things which do not appear to warrant the interest of American or European reporters. For one, he said they are constantly reminded, “every bullet has an address.” In other words, they are forbidden from taking random shots. They must be cautious, and always be conscious of their actions and of the consequences.

Soldiers are given the following instructions for engagement. If they are in a potentially hostile, or threatening situation, they are to first call out in Hebrew, Russian, and the Arabic, “Stop, or I’ll shoot.” If the person still does not stop, they are to cock their gun in a loud and threatening manner, so it is clear to the other that he is proceeding to escalate into a potentially hostile situation. Then they may shoot, but first at a 60 degree angle, so as not to hit anyone. And only after all that, are they allowed to shoot at the individual—and even then, the shot to be taken is below the knees.

I could not help but contrast these and other precautions taken by Israel, which is so frequently unjustly criticized for being overly aggressive, with the recent actions of American army in Afghanistan. Recently we shot to kill, without even knowing who we were shooting. I was shocked when I heard the general in charge of the operation tell reporters that we won’t know until the next day who we killed. Apparently, since one of the people was tall, there was speculation that Osama Ben Laden might be in the group. It turned out that we killed a number of friendly Afghanis who were scavenging through metal looking for scrap to sell. The reaction? No browbeating, or internal dissent, no self doubt about our mission, no resignation by reserve officers or questioning of our moral fiber, and no international outcry or words of condemnation were heard. If only Israel had that same luxury.

The message of caution is constantly reinforced. Last week the Talmudic notion of “tohar neshek: purity of arms” constituted the subject matter of all of their classes. They saw the movie “Platoon” to see what can happen when soldiers overcome by brutality do not think about what they are doing. In one training session a videotape of an Arab who was shot by Israeli forces was shown to

teach how not to act. Soldiers went over to help the man after stopping a news photographer from filming the event. So what was the infraction and violation of policy? The Israeli soldiers were reprimanded for not first going to help the person who had been shot. Ezra told me they were taught that although the man who was shot was their mortal enemy, who moments earlier posed a potential mortal threat to them, nevertheless, they had an obligation to offer him medical assistance. It was wrong of the soldiers to offer assistance only after stopping the cameraman for taking pictures. "We are taught," he said "that we are soldiers, but that we are people first."

The Israeli army is probably the only army in the world that incorporates such extensive ethical instruction in their combat training and which sets such high moral standards for itself, especially in light of the barbaric nature of the people they are defending against. I attribute this to the fact that it is guided by the ethical teachings of our tradition. And to a large extent, it is also the way it is because it is composed of brave, decent kind and good young men like my son, Ezra.

May the Almighty continue to watch over him, and all the soldiers and people of Israel, and may your prayers continue to sustain him, and us.

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