

# Looking Backward: The Ideology of Hesder Revisited

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## ***The Ideology of Hesder Revisited***

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[“Looking Backward” is an occasional feature on TraditionOnline.org in which we ask our authors or readers to re-explore classic essays from our pages and their ongoing contributions to religious thought. This is the second article on R. Aharon Lichtenstein’s “[The Ideology of Hesder](#)” (*Tradition* 19:3, Fall 1981), which articulated for his American readers a vision for the integration of Torah study and Israeli army service. [Read the first column by R. Yossef Slotnik](#) (*TraditionOnline*, November 2019).]



Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* was known for treating topics with impressive breadth and delicate balance. The complexity of his approach was certainly an expression of his intellectual integrity and honesty. However, it was perhaps, even more so, a profound testimony to his humility. His seminal article on the ideology of *Hesder* was no exception. Therefore, a review of that 1981 article, despite the years which separate us from its first appearance, should at first glance be no more than a summary and elucidation of the comprehensive and nuanced position outlined in the original.

This should certainly be the case regarding many arguments of the article that are based upon objective factors that are not time sensitive. However, we might question the relevance of certain aspects of the paper that were dependent on specific realities at the time it was written almost 40 years ago, and which are subject to change. For instance, let us consider *Hesder* as a balance between the obligation of Torah study and the requirement to defend the State of Israel and its citizens. Torah is the core of the timeless covenant between God and the Jewish people, while the need for a powerful military is a variable, a function of

specific geopolitical conditions of a certain place and time. Although the geopolitical map of the region has indeed changed significantly in the decades since the article was penned, the need for a strong military to defend the land and protect the people remains.

Then, as now, a high school graduate is faced with conflicting, if not somewhat contradictory options. Should he devote the next few years of his life to Torah study and spiritual growth, or should he serve in the army and join in the national effort to protect the country and the lives that dwell within. Then as now, there are three possible alternatives: total Torah immersion, full army service, and some form of combination which integrates *sefer ve-saifa* – the proverbial “scroll and sword.” R. Lichtenstein treats this dilemma critically and carefully. In his call for an integrated response, he doesn’t minimize the challenges, conflicts or dangers.

Admittedly, there are certainly peripheral variables that could be updated, such as the more prominent presence of women in combat units of today’s IDF. Nonetheless, the basic contours of the issue as outlined in the original essay remain unchanged.

In his treatment of the issue, R. Lichtenstein not only notes the various possibilities and suggests a road map to navigate them. *Hesder*, for R. Lichtenstein, is not merely a way to balance conflicting demands, but a challenge; it is not a compromise, but a vision. It is an ideal whose goal is “the enrichment of personal and communal spiritual life, the realization of that great moral and religious vision whose fulfillment is our national destiny.” When reading the article today, although the paper may be worn and the ink may have faded, the vision has lost none of its luster.

In spite of the above, upon closer inspection, I have no doubt that if written today for an Israeli audience, R. Lichtenstein would have penned a different article. The discrepancy would not be with respect to the basic arguments, but with respect to the angle and focus of the article. He begins by noting that the specific historic context was the stimulus for writing the article: “Half a dozen years ago, advocacy of the cause of yeshivot *Hesder* before the American Jewish public would have seemed largely superfluous. The impact of the Yom Kippur War was then still strong, the memory of hesderniks’ role within it still vivid, the halo of the heroic student-soldier yet fresh. The religious community, in particular, took great pride in a clearly perceived kiddush Hashem.” Similarly, when considering the article today, we might argue that the passing of time since publication of the original has not made the advocacy of *Hesder* superfluous, but has created the need to advocate the vision of *Hesder* from a different perspective.

The primary thrust of the original was to give legitimacy to the position that *bnei* Torah are not exempt from army service. R. Lichtenstein notes the major sources enlisted by those who argue for total exemption and dismantles them one by one. It is clear that he is mainly addressing the American religious Zionist community, which, despite its identification with the State of Israel, is unsure of why yeshiva students should vacate the *beit midrash* in order play an active role in the physical protection of the country. Is it not an obligation that can be

fulfilled by others, those not committed to dedicate their lives to Torah study? Therefore he presented the article “as a modest exposition of the essence of *Hesder* and its significance.” As noted above, R. Lichtenstein not only disarmed the attacks on the legitimacy of military service for yeshiva students, but presented an inspiring vision of the *Hesder* student as an ideal.

At that time there was little need to defend the abbreviated service demanded of soldiers enrolled in the *Hesder* program. The army viewed *Hesder* as an agreeable arrangement that enabled the enlistment of hundreds of yeshiva students. Non-religious citizens would point accusing fingers at the total exemption of *Haredi* yeshiva students, while noting with approval *Hesder* students managing to balance military service with Torah study. Although R. Lichtenstein dealt with all sides of the issue, his primary focus was to legitimize, or rather idealize, leaving the *beit midrash* in order to serve in the IDF.

Since then, the entire climate has changed with regard to *Hesder*. There are many factors that contributed to this change. A comprehensive treatment of this topic goes well beyond the parameters of this paper. I will make note of only those that, in my opinion, had the greatest impact.

During March and April 1982, only a few months after the article appeared, the southern community of Yamit, in the Sinai desert, was evacuated and its houses razed in the framework of the peace agreement with Egypt. The evacuation of Yamit was opposed by the majority of the religious Zionist community in Israel. Although there were notable exceptions, among them R. Lichtenstein and R. Yehuda Amital (co-Roshei Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion), the position of the large majority of the community opposed the evacuation from the Sinai settlements. There are a number of reasons for this opposition, but in our focus on yeshivot *Hesder*, we will place special emphasis on the halakhik discussion. The mainstream position of the rabbinic leadership was that relinquishing Jewish sovereignty on any part of the Land of Israel, and handing it over to non-Jews in order to achieve peace, was a violation of Torah law. This position was already voiced following the Six Day War (1967).<sup>1</sup> The noteworthy development during the Yamit evacuation was the ruling of certain rabbis that soldiers must disobey military orders to evict Yamit residents since such orders contradict the halakha. This ruling was not mainstream and was opposed by major *poskim* and rabbinic leaders, among them R. Avraham Shapiro, Rosh Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, arguably the most influential yeshiva of the Religious Zionist community in Israel. Other notable exceptions were R. Zvi Tau and R. Shlomo Aviner, who, following Rav Kook, viewed the State and its institutions not only as modern day expressions of Jewish monarchy, but as a reflection of divine rule. Therefore, they maintained, that State’s laws must be upheld and the integrity of the IDF preserved.

In the end, opposition to the pullout for the most part, took the form of civil disobedience and *Hesder* soldiers obeyed their orders. However, a crack began to form between the army and the yeshivot. The cooperation between the two, which lies at the very root of *Hesder*, was

replaced by tension. The predicament of whether *Hesder* soldiers were loyal to their commanders or to their Roshei Yeshiva, had become an issue. In addition, by taking what was considered a political stand, the attitude of the general public towards yeshivot *Hesder* began to sour. The army, at least theoretically, must remain apolitical. *Hesder* units were now suspect of being driven by a political agenda, which was viewed as extreme in some quarters.<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is important to note that this so-called “extreme” political opinion drew heavily on a religious vision, which could be considered messianic.

Following the evacuation of Yamit, things began to return to normal. In fact, on Israel Independence Day in 1991, Yeshivot *Hesder* were awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for their contribution to the State and society. On the whole, the thorny issues that sank from view after 1982 did not resurface until the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993), which were guidelines for a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, following secret negotiations between the Labor government of Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO. The agreement called for establishing a Palestinian Authority and placing significant portions of Judea and Samaria under its control. The opposition to the Oslo Accords was fierce. The majority of the religious Zionist rabbinic leadership attacked the accords. The reasons were both political as well as religious. As noted above, they maintained that forfeiting land for peace was a violation of the Torah. Once again, there were Rabbis who issued a ruling that soldiers should disobey military orders, however, this time the ruling was issued by leading rabbinic authorities, including former Chief Rabbis, R. Shlomo Goren and R. Avraham Shapiro. It is very significant to note that certain Roshei Yeshivot *Hesder* were among those who publicly ruled that religious soldiers should disobey their commanders. Although, on the whole, religious soldiers followed the ruling of more moderate rabbis, such as R. Tau<sup>3</sup> and R. Aviner, who maintained their opposition to disobeying military orders. Nevertheless, the call for disobedience created tremendous strain between the yeshivot and the army.

An additional reason for the opposition was that the political right was convinced that giving control and weapons to former Palestinian terrorists would lead to bloodshed. In its most extreme expression, some rabbinic leaders suggested that Prime Minister Rabin could be considered a “*rodef*,” one in pursuit of a victim to endanger his life. In order to save the person being chased, one may kill the “*rodef*” if necessary. This ominous suggestion became infamous following the assassination of Rabin at the hands of Yigal Amir, himself a *Hesder* graduate (1995). Religious Zionists were unjustly blamed for direct responsibility for the assassination. However, they could not wash their hands of the indictment that their community and educational institutions indirectly created an environment within which the assassin could emerge. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note the corrosive impact on the general public attitude towards religious Zionism in general and yeshivot *Hesder* in particular.

Rabin’s assassination was traumatic for the entire country. In its aftermath, there were serious attempts to bridge the gap between the right and left. For the next ten years tensions between army and *Hesder* went into hibernation, until they were awoken by Prime Minister

Ariel Sharon's plan for the unilateral disengagement from Gaza and the dismantling of the Gush Katif settlements, which took place in 2005. In anticipation of the Gaza disengagement, a large number of rabbis signed a halakhic ruling that religious soldiers should disobey military orders, among them many Roshei Yeshivot *Hesder*.<sup>4</sup>In contrast to the previous rounds, calls for military disobedience were much more widespread and much more vocal. This dealt a serious blow to the already strained relations between the army and the *Hesder* yeshivot. Moreover, it added stains to the already tarnished public image of *Hesder*.

Although R. Tau and R. Aviner maintained their opposition to disobeying military orders, even they no longer advised religious soldiers to actively follow orders. They preferred a policy whereby the soldiers would avoid direct involvement in the evacuation altogether.

The traditional mainstream religious Zionist stance, which awarded sanctity to the State and its institutions, was being reevaluated. Could the State still be considered a reflection of divine rule if it relinquished parts of the Land of Israel acquired miraculously through divine intervention? It was no longer obvious in religious Zionist circles that service in the IDF should be promoted. As a barometer of these changing winds people pointed to communities which ceased reciting the prayer for the welfare of the State. These attitudes became more extreme a few months later, when violent clashes erupted between special police units and settlers during the evacuation and demolition of houses in Amona, an outpost on the West Bank.

In the summer of 2006 one year after the pullout from Gush Katif, hostilities broke out between Hezbollah and Israel in what was known as the Second Lebanon War. Recalling the emotional and inspiring prayer assemblies prior to the evacuation of Gush Katif, I tried to arrange a prayer assembly in response to the war. I called R. Lichtenstein, to secure his backing. He told me to first ask R. Yuval Cherlow, an influential leader of the religious Zionist community. I called R. Yuval, who remarked sadly that there is no way to unite the community on this. The attempt will collapse, he predicted, on the question of whether the prayer for welfare of the State of Israel should be recited. I recall how disturbed and frustrated I was that our community couldn't get together to pray for the protection of our soldiers and civilians who were under attack from an outside aggressor.

The anti-State sentiment infected yeshivot *Hesder* as well. This created a breakdown of the cooperation between the army and yeshivot and affected issues beyond the political questions of the settlements. In order to more fully appreciate the deterioration of the *Hesder* arrangement, one must consider an additional factor. A new player arrived on the scene, which from the army's perspective was much preferable to *Hesder* – the pre-army *Mekhinot*.

The first *Mekhina Kdam Tzva'it Toranit* was established in 1988. The term "*mekhina*" means "preparation," and their purpose is to prepare religious high school students for a meaningful army service. Prior to the establishment of the *Mekhinot*, many religious high school students joined the *Hesder* yeshivot, not because they were really interested in Torah study, but

because they felt unprepared religiously for the challenges of three years of army service and a secular environment. Placing such students in a *beit midrash* to study Talmud was not really what these students wanted or needed. The purpose of the *Mekhinot* was to cater directly to the needs of those students.

In preparing religious students for their army service, focus is placed on the encounter with secular society in the army by studying Jewish thought, beliefs, and outlooks. Students also prepare physically for their service period, and receive leadership training from active-duty officers.

In contrast to the yeshivot *Hesder*, participation in the *Mekhina* program did not demand any discounts in terms of army service. While the *Hesder* yeshivot might hedge regarding students who were asked to spend more time in the army in order to serve as officers, the *Mekhinot* actively encouraged their students to become officers. Moreover, as opposed to *Hesder* students, who served together in specific *Hesder* units, a successful *Mekhinot* graduate would be willing to serve in the most elite units, sometimes alongside predominately secular peers. On the whole, for religious Zionist high school students, the choice was not between a fulltime yeshiva or *Hesder*, but between *Hesder* or *Mekhina*. The army clearly saw *Mekhinot* as the better option by far.

In addition, it is important to note that the concept of *Mekhinot* was developed by R. Eli Sadan, a disciple of Rav Tau. As I noted earlier, R. Tau viewed the State and its institutions as modern day expressions of Jewish monarchy, and voiced a moderate position with regard to tensions between settlers, the State, and the army.

*Mekhinot* became very popular with high school students and many were opened in subsequent years. A very high percentage of their students serve in combat and special units. A disproportionate number of graduates continue in the army to become commanders of battalions and divisions. As a result, *Mekhinot* became very popular in the public eye as well. In fact, in 2016, 25 years after the yeshivot *Hesder* received the Israel Prize, R. Sadan was awarded the same honor in the same category: special contribution to Society and State.

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In 2012, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a ruling that forced the government to pass a bill to regulate the deferment of yeshiva students from military service.<sup>5</sup> The Plesner Committee, also known as the Commission for Equality of the Burden was charged with formulating recommendations for the conscription of yeshiva students. The final draft of the bill was formulated by the Shaked committee and voted into law in 2014.

Although the main purpose of the committee was to regulate the deferment of yeshiva students who were totally exempt from army service, the shorter active military service of the *Hesder* soldiers came under attack as well. In fact, for some, *Hesder* became the main issue.

The following quote from an op-ed column sums up the tone and temperament of the attack:

Slogans like equality of burden, the threat of sanctions on *Haredi* draft evaders and additional spins... are an attempt to cover up the real inequality – protecting the short service of yeshivot *Hesder* ... The end result is that everyone will serve fully except for soldiers of yeshivot *Hesder*... I know of no decision more unequal and outrageous.

Pointing an accusing finger at yeshivot *Hesder* as opposed to *Haredi* yeshivot—where no one serves in the IDF!—is so absurd that it can only be understood in the context of the deterioration noted above. Recall that in 1991 yeshivot *Hesder* were awarded the Israel Prize. It would have been unimaginable in 2014.

Although it is clear that the attack on *Hesder* was spearheaded by the political and ideological enemies of religious Zionism, the general sentiment that *Hesder* does not qualify as shouldering an “equal burden” is shared by many religious Zionists as well. During proceedings of the Shaked Committee, Elazar Stern, a religious member of Knesset, was very vocal that *Hesder* service should be lengthened. Furthermore, he argued that *Hesder* should be limited to an elite group that could serve in a leadership capacity, but should not be an available option to the average yeshiva high school graduate.

All of the above is background to the claim that, if written today, R. Lichtenstein’s article would have a different focus. The main thrust of the article would not be to debate those who argue that Torah study justifies army exemption. On the whole, the typical graduate from a religious Zionist high school will not be considering full yeshiva studies. Rather, he will be deliberating between *Mekhina* and *Hesder*. His deliberations will be affected by the tarnished public opinion with regard to *Hesder*, and public appreciation and respect for the *Mekhinot*. He will be troubled by the argument that *Hesder* soldiers are guilty of not sharing the burden equally. Therefore, the focus of today’s article would be not only a defense but an idealization of the integration of Torah studies and abbreviated military service.

In fact, my claim is not mere conjecture. At some point, R. Lichtenstein amended the original essay by inserting a paragraph to the subsequent Hebrew version of the article. That new passage directly addressed the issue of the *Mekhinot*:

In this regard, yeshivot *Hesder* are distinct from the pre-army *Mekhinot* in both essence and principle. The contrast is not limited to different division of time and effort; it touches on the very foundation of the goals and their implementation. *Mekhina* (meaning preparation) is precisely what it was named. It is designed to maintain the connection of the student to the holy world of Jewish heritage and his identity as a believing and observant Jew. It aspires spiritually and practically to arm him with the fortitude required to endure as a religious soldier. Regarding many, the *Mekhinot* achieve this goal with success; and it is clear that for their contribution in the attainment of ideological and national goals – specifically with respect to that segment of society unable or unwilling to continue their connection to the *beit midrash* for a substantial period of time – the *Mekhinot* are worthy of appreciation and respect. However, with regard to a group who cherish Torah, who are saturated with the desire and ability to engage in it and to be invigorated by studying and applying it, yeshivot *Hesder* enable students to take flight like fledgling birds. Although they also maintain that in order to ensure that the kippa remain firmly fastened on the head, it is worthwhile to deepen the development of the head under the kippa, educationally as well as spiritually. However, in this development they focus on building a Torah personality as an independent value. According to them, despite the importance of the issue, one should not suffice with maintaining the current level of Torah connection and fear of heaven that the student attained at the age of nineteen. The focus is therefore on growth and development – both for the future of the student himself, as well as for his contribution, albeit as a layman, to the ethical and spiritual fortitude of the state. Herein lies the difference both in structure and in concept. Whereas with regard to the *Mekhinot*, the period of Torah study is perceived, and to a large extent realized, as preparation for the army, and implemented in its shadow, in the yeshivot *Hesder*, even the military period is considered an aspect of an organic Torah matrix, and within its framework, via maintaining contact with the yeshiva during the service, the student-soldier is rooted.

In the first version of the article R. Lichtenstein defended and idealized the *Hesder* model of integration, in contrast to a position of pure Torah study. He argued that, as descendants of Abraham, the basic Jewish characteristic of *hessed* demanded active participation in the defense of the country and protecting the lives of its citizens. Integrating Torah study with army service should be viewed as a realization of Jewish values and ideals.

In the imagined updated version, I suggest that R. Lichtenstein would have contrasted *Hesder* to the conceptual position of full army service. As outlined in his amendment, R. Lichtenstein considered the *Mekhinot* as preparation for total army immersion. Ideologically, this position is rooted in the view that serious engagement in Torah study should be limited to an elite group in preparation for their role as religious leaders and halakhic rulers. However, for the rank and file, it is sufficient to have faith in Hashem and to be observant (no small



matter, to be sure). This position was expressed powerfully by M.K. Stern, in his call to limit the number of participants in *Hesder*, and resonated within the religious Zionist community in Israel.

In practical terms, R. Lichtenstein admitted that not all high school graduates are able or willing to seriously engage in Torah study. However, in principle, he is not at all sympathetic to the ideological position noted above. R. Lichtenstein was of the opinion that anyone can, and therefore should, place the crown of Torah on his head. Engagement in Torah is stimulating and invigorating and connects one to the Sinai revelation in a direct way. Whether one dedicates his life to Torah study, or chooses a different vocation, engagement in Torah should be significant in his life.

For R. Lichtenstein, this was a fundamental issue that was far more important than the specific formula chosen to balance Torah study and military service, or the particular method of Talmudic study. In fact, Yeshivat Har Etzion now has a program that allows for full military service following two years of yeshiva study. However, during those two years, the student is immersed fully in Torah study, not (only) in order to prepare for military service, but in order to prepare for a life of continued Torah engagement. The question is not how long one studies before the army, but the ideal and vision being promoted and the level of success in realizing that ideal, irrespective of whether it is a *Hesder* yeshiva or a *Mekhina*. In an atmosphere that often devalues Torah study for the ordinary Jew, R. Lichtenstein would have articulated the vision of a life not only based upon Torah observance, but of serious Torah engagement, eloquently and powerfully.

R. Lichtenstein argued that cultivating a serious religious Zionist Torah community was of national importance as well. In his words:

Knesset Israel needs not only security but spirituality – and ultimately, the former for the sake of the latter. Those who, by dint of knowledge and inspiration, are able to preserve and enrich our moral vision and spiritual heritage, contribute incalculably to the quality of our national life; and this must be considered in determining personal and collective priorities.

Moreover, such a community, rooted firmly in Torah, while participating in the army and society at large, could be a moderating and unifying force given the frictions and divisions in Israeli society. In order to create this community, without compromising on the participation in the defense of the country and protection of its citizens, which *gemilut hasadim* demands, some form of integration of serious post-high school Torah study and military service is necessary.

While the ethical call for equality of burden demands that an individual not impose his share of the load on his fellow, for personal gain, it is generally accepted that communal and national needs justify abbreviated service. Therefore, this communal necessity forms the

ideological basis and legitimacy which allows *Hesder* soldiers to commit to a five-year integrated program, despite the abbreviated military service.

In short, R. Lichtenstein's now classic essay explained the ideal of integrating military service with Torah studies. My suggested update explains the ideal of integrating Torah studies with military service. However, both versions conclude on the same note: "Standing in tears atop Har Hazeitim, the bleak sight of *kol hamekudash mehavero harev yoter mehavero* stretching before him, what would the Ramban have given to head a yeshivat *Hesder*?"

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