

Mattot/Masey

הֲאַחֶיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה

Numbers 32:6 *Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?*



Mattot and Masey, this week's double portion, presents many challenges for contemporary readers. One particular piece of the story is the request in Chapter 32 of Reuven and Gad (and later one half the tribe of Menasseh) to settle outside the promised land. They insist that the conditions on the East side of the Jordan are excellent for grazing and that they would do well to remain there rather than crossing into Canaan.

Moses' reply is swift and critical. He insists that their request could negatively influence the rest of the Israelites and asks why they feel exempt from the responsibility of their fellow tribes. G-d then decides that, except for Caleb and Joshua, the present generation of adults (having come out of Egypt) will not enter into the promised land. Immediately following this incident, Moses outlines all the places through which the Israelites journeyed to get to this point. It's almost as if the text is saying - "look how far we've come, look at the many steps we've taken to get this far, and now you dare to reject the ultimate destiny?"

In the modern State of Israel, there are communities that continue to be granted indefinite postponement, or exemption, from participation in the State of Israel's civil service and armed forces, defending and protecting the land and its citizens. This is not just true of non-Jews in Israel but of Jewish segments of the Ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*). Yet, looking back to 1948, it's clear that the positions on exemption from service were not universally held by all religious groups. There are posters from 1948 which were created by the Agudat Yisrael party, the first *Haredi* political party in Israel, that call for religious men to join the army in the wake of the 1948-49 war. Nevertheless David Ben-Gurion established an opportunity for exemption from service for reasons of continuity of torah studies.

Concerning women, Israel made history by being the first country in the world to apply mandatory conscription to females when they enacted the Defense Service Law in 1949. Originally, women were to serve between 1 and 1.5 years. And, now it's two years with an optional third. This is a prime example of how Israel sought to uphold its declared equality of all citizens. However, the law did stipulate that if a woman felt that her religious practice prevented her from serving, she could be exempt.

Debate regarding exemption from service has been ongoing since the establishment of the State of Israel. One particular dispute concerns the branch of government that should have the authority to grant exemption - the Executive or the Legislative. The exemption was never a legal one, rather it was a postponement granted by ministerial order. As the number of postponements rose, causing social tensions between the *Haredi* communities

and the rest of the population, the Tal Committee, led by Supreme Court Justice Tzvi Tal was established. Beginning in 1999 the Tal Committee reviewed the postponements and exemptions for Yeshiva students as well as non-Jewish Israelis. The outcome was the Tal Law, enacted in July of 2002 and renewed after 5 years. The law stated that at age 22, yeshiva students would be granted a one year decision-making period after which they would join up for rudimentary service in the IDF or continue their studies. Since then, five motions have been brought before the High Courts, claiming that the Tal Law was unconstitutional and in 2012 it was terminated. Concerning non-Jewish Israelis, Druze and Circassian males are subject to conscription to the IDF. In 1950, the Druze specifically appeals to Ben-Gurion to be drafted on equal terms as Jewish men, even though the previous year, the State Defence Act granted them exemptions. At first, a special unit was established for the Druze men, and this has been maintained, along with a name-change from Unit 300 to Sword Battalion, since the 1950's. However, earlier this year, the IDF announced their intent to disband the special unit because of the desire of the Druze community to integrate into units and the fact that most have already done so.

For the *Haredim*, in March of 2014 a new decision was rendered, allowing yeshiva students to be exempt from the draft for sake of job training - 28,000 have taken advantage of this provision. While some argue that it gives unfair privileges to this community, others say that it helps individuals to be productive members of society thus benefitting everyone.

There are many people who believe that the benefits of serving in the IDF include better socialization and improved living conditions in post IDF years. Men from the Druze, Circassian and Bedouin communities and Arabic-speaking residents of Israel, many identified as Arab Christians, have a more promising future after IDF job training and networking. Since 1958, Druze Israeli's have enlisted (and over 80% continue to do so). Gabriel Naddaf, a Greek Orthodox priest, promotes enlistment through the "Israeli-Christian Recruitment Forum," established in 2013. The Forum has its own flag—a sword in the shape of a cross behind the Star of David.

Ultimately, our biblical figures Reuven and Gad agree to arm themselves and go to war alongside the others, after which they will return to settle in the valley outside of Canaan. It would seem regarding military affairs, just as our biblical ancestors found a way to compromise, contemporary leaders attempt to do the same in order to satisfy the diverse citizens who live in Israel.

### **Discussion Questions:**

Should exemptions or postponements be granted to particular segments of Israeli society? If so, what kind and for whom?

Do you think that Israel should actively work to recruit non-Jewish Israelis to enlist and serve in the IDF?

### **Additional Resources:**

Zipkin, Romy. [Israel Closer to Ultra Orthodox Conscription](#), Tablet Magazine, 5/31, 2013

JTA: [Hundreds Protest Joining of Yeshiva Student for Evading Draft](#), Times of Israel, 8/18. 2014

Library of Congress, [Israel: Supreme Court Decision Invalidating the Law on Haredi Military Draft Postponement](#)

Vick, Karl. [Israeli Army Sees rise in Christian Arab Recruits](#), 3/7, 2014

Sharon, Jeremy. [Thousands of Haredi Exempted from Military Service Granted Access to Work Force](#), Jerusalem Post, 7/8 2015

Cohen, Gili. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.657084>, Ha'aretz, 5/19,2015