

**IS THE SOLDIERS' MOTHER HAPPY?  
ON THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MOTHER'S ROLE  
AND CIVIL OBLIGATION. AN ISRAELI  
SEMI-PERSONAL VIEW**

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## Abstract

The issues Israeli women have to deal with when their children –in particular their sons– are to get drafted to the compulsory army service, at the age of 18, are not new. However, when the political ideology of such a mother is not within the “*consensus*” zone/limits the mother must face the crucial question: am I going to support my son who in the next three years at least is going to serve in an organization I object to, among people I don't particularly wish that he meets, and under the command of men and women whose judgment might not have passed as minimally fair or even humanistic?

**Key words:** War policies, Israel, Mother's rol, army service.

## ¿SON LAS MADRES DE LOS SOLDADOS FELICES? SOBRE EL CONFLICTO ENTRE EL ROL DE MADRE Y LA OBLIGACIÓN CIVIL. UNA VISIÓN ISRAELI SEMI-PERSONAL

### Resumen

Los problemas que las mujeres israelíes deben enfrentar cuando sus hijos – en particular sus hijos hombres – son reclutados al servicio militar obligatorio a los 18 años de edad, no son nuevos. Sin embargo, cuando la ideología política de la madre no está dentro del “*consenso*” establecido, la madre debe enfrentar la pregunta crucial: ¿voy a apoyar a mi hijo, quien en los próximos tres años por lo menos, va a servir en una organización a la que me opongo, con personas con quienes particularmente no me gustaría que se reuniera, y bajo el mando de hombres y mujeres cuyo juicio no podría ser juzgado mínimamente como justo, o siquiera humanista?

**Palabras clave:** Políticas de guerra, Israel, rol de la madre, servicio militar.

### Is the mother of sons blessed?

When an Israeli-Jewish woman gives birth to a male baby she hears, quite often, that she has contributed another soldier to the Jewish nation. This reaction is based on several facts:

1. The very first command Got had told Adam he must oblige to was: *“Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, [...]”* (Genesis, 1, 28).
2. While it is very clear, that the fertility of a community is determined by the size of its female population, in the Jewish *Talmud*<sup>1</sup> there is an argument as to what are a person’s duties in order to fulfill this divine law. According to The Shamai School a man can stop breeding after having two sons; Hillel’s school’s, which has been accepted by Orthodox Jewry, is that the command is fulfilled after giving birth to one son and one daughter. There is no mention of the possibility that two daughters might do, even though they can contribute to the demography more than a daughter and a son, let alone two sons.
3. In spite of the fact that in most cases the Jewish law a husband cannot divorce a woman against her will, if a man has been married to a woman for 10 years and she did not bear a child the *Talmud*<sup>2</sup> offers two options: forcing the man to divorce his wife or marry another woman while still married to the first one. This law has still been practiced by some more traditional sub-populations in Israel.
4. The holocaust memory, still very alive among large parts of the Israeli population, serves as efficient tool for justifying anything connected to *“our army”*. It is based on the assumption, that during the holocaust Jews were killed *“like sheep to the slaughter”* (Conway, 2005), which is not going to happen again to a nation with a strong army.
5. The governmental policy of encouraging birth, especially among Jews, starting with the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion: האי צוהל ותוא סיפוכ וידה רקיעמ, הדלי אלו מינש רשע ומע התהשו השא אשנ. המע מינב תב תרחא אשי וא, טגב.

In the early 50ies, Ben Gurion had initiated a plan according to which symbolic money rewards were granted to *“heroine mothers”*, those who had ten children or more;” [...] (Sharoni, 1994: 322).

### Letter from the Prime Minister to a mother of ten

Jerusalem, December 6<sup>th</sup> 1950

The Israeli government sends you a check in the amount of 100 Israeli Lira in both as appreciation and encouragement to a mother who has given birth and raised 10 children.

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<sup>1</sup> *Yevamot*, 61: 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ketubot*, 72: 1.

You have been blessed by upbringing your children to achieve Torah, namely learning, Avoda, working, and good deeds for the sake of the homeland and the nation. Let your hands be strong!<sup>3</sup>

D. Ben-Gurion

Mrs. Tovah Katz  
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Photo taken from the private archive of Ms. Dina Gona. from <http://cafe.themarker.com/view.php?t=408338>

## The government policy of birth encouraging

This policy has started a short time after the establishment of the very small Israel, with but 600,000 Jewish residents, who had lost 6,373 young people, mostly men, in its independence war [Israel's War of Independence (1947-1949), 2008].

During the 6-Day War (5-10 June 1967), about 1,000,000 Arabs were added to the ~300,000 Arab who were Israeli citizens. The sudden "demographic

<sup>3</sup> The Book of Zechariah, 8: 13.

*imbalance*", threatening the "Jewish country" was the source of the following Israeli government decisions:

[...] initiate propaganda actions, to remove economical and social obstacles, and to ensure, and to ease housing and education difficulties to large families, in order to encourage people to expand their families. In addition, it was decided that abortions would be restricted. In order to enable the materialization of the demographic policy the government decided to establish the demographic center (Stopler, 2008: 474).

The target of this initiative was only Jews. Stopler (*ibid.*) has argued that this policy was discriminating against non-Jewish minorities.

This kind of governmental pressure, under the definition of "encouragement", is, of course, not new, and has been practiced until recently. For example:

1. In 1913 the French government passed a law stating that families with 3+ children would get financial support (Tomlinson, 1985; Nord, 1994).
2. In 2008 the president of Turkmenistan has promised a reward of 250\$ to women giving birth to more than eight children, In addition to lifetime benefits such as free dental care, utilities and public transport (Turkmenistan's plan for baby boom, 2008).
3. In 1988, the French National Family Allowance Office (CNAF) has published new family support laws, according to which allowance is given to families starting with the second child, and a substantial increase of the amount of money is granted with the third child (Government Programmes in France, n.d.).
4. The Soviet Union has had a long history of financial aid and allowances for large families. In 1936 provided annual allowances for a seventh and subsequent children until their fifth birthday. In 1944 it was extended to the third and subsequent children, but in 1948 the sums were cut by 50% (Heer & Bryden, 1966).

Indeed, the policy of encouraging birth is a governmental policy clearly observed by the substantial public investment in fertility treatments. "The right of parenting" has been defined by Ravitsky (2002): "a person has the right to act in any possible way including ways enabled [solely] by [advanced] technology (without harming others' rights) in order to create a child connected by genetics or birth to at least one of her or his parents-to-be, intending to raise her or his as their own".

However, in Israeli society birth encouragement is not just a governmental policy; it is a norm rooted deeply in society. Liebllich (2003) has written the story of tens of Israeli women who do not live with a man on a regular basis, but they have all considered giving birth to a child. One of the most interesting of these stories is that of the Lesbians who have been ignored by their neighbours for years. When the pregnancy of one of the young ladies showed up, the neighbours suddenly became friendly with them, even though the pregnancy made their life style a fact that could not be ignored any longer...

Why is that so?

The reasons for parents' involvement.

The "good old days", when the army had been perceived as almost holy, are over. The first and second Lebanon Wars, as well as the 2009 Gaza War, have made a change in the public support which is not guaranteed automatically any more. But the process of enabling criticism against some military acts have started much about a decade ago:

[...] Israel's army today is fighting a rearguard action against critical public scrutiny. Criticism comes from a number of sources, most prominently the media, then the courts, army reservists, and parents of soldiers on active duty. Courts today interfere in a wide range of military matters, ranging from human rights to gender issues. Parents of Israeli soldiers – many of whom have served in the military themselves – demand a right to voice an opinion not only on where their children will serve but also on the conditions of their service. Public criticism of the IDF is also emerging among reservists. (Epstein, 2002: 133).

According to Herzog (1998), living in a constant situation of conflict, as Jews in Israel have been used to, helps building a highly gendered world, where the family is the asset of the public as well as the private life. An Israeli mother, whose son is getting drafted, is walking through a path full of social bumps if her ideology is not in consistence with the "Israeli norms". Ben-Asher (2003) describes some of the duties a mother of a soldier must oblige to, included under the title: "The parent-army mutual relationship"

The traditional role of parents during their children's military service is to *provide moral and physical support*. Various activities such as the soldiers "Saturday laundry" (weekend laundering and ironing of uniform), "care packages" sent to the army bases

on weekends when the soldier is restricted to the base, have become traditions and social rituals in Israel. *Saturday visits* have become established as semi-formal paradigms in which the soldiers' parents and the army are involved in a complex relationship of material and emotional dependency (Ben-Asher, 2003: 6.2, my italics – H.D.).

Though the duties in this list are aimed at both parents, the addressee of some of them is "*the mother*": laundering, ironing, and packages preparing and sending.

In addition to these duties there are others more. For example:

1. A "*motherly obligation*" includes accompanying him to his base on the day he gets drafted. If she has other plans for that day, for example – if she is expected to participate in a conference abroad, she is sure to hear remarks such as: "*I would have never preferred my own interests over those of my sons*", or even: "*career women cannot be good mothers*". The option of not watching one's son until he disappears in the army bus with his peers is usually not considered at all; it is "*well known*" that the son "*needs*" his mother at "*such a critical point of his life*", and thus "*it is her obligation to do that*". Refusing to oblige to this duty because of ideological reasons labels the mother as "*anti-Zionist*", "*egotistic*" or even: "*a mother who damages her child's ability to be a 'good soldier'*".
2. During the whole military service the soldier's family is expected to provide for him financially. The monthly allowance a soldier is paid is less than 100US\$, a sum that in most cases does not cover the expenses of the soldier who stays in his base most of the time, let alone those of a soldier who lives at home. Indeed, there is a procedure of "*being declared as a family-less*" soldier, but unless a soldier has cut himself from his family due to major problems or when the soldier's family lives abroad, this procedure is very unacceptable socially. Thus, during the 3-year obligatory service the soldier lives in his parents' home, and the state relies on their "*good citizenship*" and does not pay him a salary. Parents who object to military service, and especially mothers who think their obligation is to change the militaristic-patriarchal system of society are in conflict between their "*natural*" drive to provide for their son and their objection to contribute to a system they wish to change.

3. During the basic training a mother's duty is to provide constant emotional support to her son. This includes being available for him all the time: on the phone as in person. The son is expected to call home every day, even when he hardly has time to go to the toilet, while the mother is "to be there" at all hours, to listen empathically to her son's problems, and in the last 2 decades – to interfere with military decisions when she thinks her son was mal-treated.
4. Parents are expected to show up not only on the *Saturday visits*, but also in each ceremony indicating the end of a military stage (e.g. basic training), finishing a course or getting a rank. This obligation is not to be missed – no matter how far they have to drive or whether the temperature is over 40 degrees. The music in such ceremonies can make a person deaf, but this is no excuse for absence either. Though the invitations are very explicit about the hour of the beginning of the event, the more "Israeli" one is the easier it is to decipher how much earlier they should arrive. While if an Israeli wedding is to start at 8 there is almost always an hour delay, and in many it can be even two hours, for a military ceremony it is the other way round: being "more Israeli" is to know what is the earliest possible time to come, both in order to get a "good seat" and meet the son earlier. The parents who come on time are "neglecting" the needs of the "child", whose peers enjoy the visits of "more Israeli" parents, and might risk standing throughout the ceremony, because the "more patriotic" families, who have come earlier, usually bringing along as many family relatives as possible, leaving the "on time" parents to watch the ceremony from a distance, tired and disappointed.

## Summary

In order to achieve a full cooperation of the families, especially of the mothers, to the unnatural aim of gladly sending one's child to the army and supporting him – emotionally and financially – during the 3-year obligatory service, Israel has recruited the following sources:

1. The Bible. David Ben Gurion, the first Israeli prime minister, was not a religious man, but he was a great lover of the Bible. When he wanted to show his respect (or flatter?) to a mother who had given birth to ten children he used the biblical phrase "Until I arose a mother in Israel" (Judges, 5:7, American Standard Version,

- 1901), originally from the song of the Prophetess Deborah, a woman known by her “*masculine*” doings rather than as a symbol of motherhood.
2. Hebrew poetry. The letter from the prime minister was concluded with the phrase: “*Let your hands be strong*”. “*let [...] be strong*” [TECHEZAKNA] is the short, popular name of the “*Blessing of the nation*”<sup>4</sup> poem, written in 1894 by C.N. Bialik, the “*national poet*”, adopted by the Israeli Labour Movement as its hymn.
  3. The law, which has encouraged births among Jews. In the early seventies the social security institute has started paying “*the veteran allowance*” in addition to the child allowance to all families with 3+ children. The two sub-populations with the highest birth-rate have been UltraOrthodox and Arabs. However, even though a substantial part of Ultra-Orthodox Jews do not serve in the army, a new definition of “*a soldier*”: “*a person who has served in the security forces, or her/his spouse, child or parent has*” resulted in the fact that most Jews with 3+ children were entitled to this allowance, while most Arabs were not.
  4. Medicine. Israel is considered a “*powerful country in the field of fertility treatments*” (citation of Prof. Shlomo Mashiah, broadcasted on July 20, 2009 on *Reshet Alef* Israeli Radio Station).<sup>5</sup> In Israel every woman –married or single– is entitled to free fertilization treatment until she mothers two children.
  5. Society. Social norms have been seriously challenged by the expanding of the single mothering phenomenon, being acceptable by populations who had banned single mothers in the past. Such populations include highly-educated non-Ashkenazi traditional young women, who moved back to live with their origin families in the periphery in order to be aided by them after giving birth to a baby (Rotem, 2004), or religious women who have given birth after consulting their rabbi (Safrai, 2009).

## A personal experience

In 1986, when my third son was born, everybody felt it was their obligation to tell me how happy I must have felt, citing from Psalm 113, 9: “[...] *a joyful mother of sons*”. It took many years before I realized, that indeed, I must have been indeed happy; not only did I give birth to three children, they all were

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<sup>4</sup> Ch.N. Bialik (1883-2000). *Collected poems*.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Mashiah has been proud of enabling a 64-year woman to give birth, as well as to a 54-year old who had lost her soldier son, and a 46-year old woman, who had given birth to her 14-year old son by artificial fertilization. At the time of the interview she was pregnant with her son’s “*twin-brother*” by the frozen fertilized ovum kept in the hospital laboratory (Duek, 2004).

sons!<sup>6</sup> These blesses, when coming from Orthodox Jews, were accompanied with the biblical phrase: "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (Genesis, 3:29, *New American Standard Bible*, 1995) said by Jacob's less beloved wife, Leah, after she had given birth to her third son, Levi. I did not know what sure have insulted me more: the belief that I needed to "supply" three sons in order to secure my marriage or to ensure the company of my husband, or the one that sons were a better guarantee for this wonderful promised future than daughters.

However, when some of the good souls praised me for "contributing three more soldiers to our country" I cited Adrienne Rich (1995), who visited her French friends and colleagues during the Vietnam War. When she told them she was a mother of three sons they asked: "Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame?" (You are working for the army?).

More than 23 years have passed since then, during which I have written over 60 articles, published six books and lectured in dozens of national and international conferences. But like so many other Israeli mothers, who have been torn for years between the only acceptable option of "mothering" as perceived by society, and their inner self, it has been the first time that I dare "coming out". I hereby promise it is not going to be the last.

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<sup>6</sup> When examining the English translation to this Psalms phrase we can see that most of the translations refer to the "mother of children" (*New American Standard Bible* (1995); *King James Bible* (n.d.); American King James Version (1999); American Standard Version (1901); Douay-Rheims Bible (n.d.); Old Testament (1885); Webster's Bible Translation; World English Bible) rather than, as in the original "mother of sons" (Darby Bible Translation; Young's Literal Translation).

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