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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Ultra-Orthodox Israelis Are Joining the Army

Hamas's atrocities spark a rethinking of the religious-secular status quo that dates back to 1948.

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Soldiers of the Israeli army's Shachar Kachol ultra-Orthodox unit train in Haifa. PHOTO: MENAHEM KAHANA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Jerusalem

Soon after the May 1948 birth of the state of Israel, a meeting took place between David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, and Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, a leading religious figure and head of Israel's ultra-Orthodox (in Hebrew, *Haredi*) community. The result was the Status Quo Agreement, which charted two parallel lines: one for Jewish Israelis at large, whether secular or religious, the other tailored to the needs of Haredi Jews in particular.

Over the decades, the former "line" helped Jewish Israelis flourish in a modern state. The Haredi line restored the fortunes of a special religious world that,

after being nearly destroyed in the Holocaust, was re-established. That world was upgraded with such institutions as Torah academies, synagogues, and Hasidic courts; in various subsects and religious activities; and in whole Haredi municipalities.

For decades, this parallel arrangement functioned efficiently. Both groups thrived. But given the growth of Haredi society, from 3% of Israel's population in 1948 to almost 14% today, profound challenges have arisen. Part of Israel's recent social unrest is the product of tension between the Haredi and non-Haredi public over the military draft. For Ben-Gurion, service in the Israel Defense Forces fulfilled two linked purposes: defending the homeland and molding the new, nationalistic and secularized model of the Israeli Jew. The Haredim have no theological objection to military service, but they were wedded to the old model and sought to opt out. Ben-Gurion, sensitive to the project of resurrecting the religious world from the ashes, acquiesced.

Statistically insignificant at inception, the opt-out has since become a huge issue. According to their political leaders, most Haredim hope to sustain their religiously devout and socially reclusive lives permanently under the protection of their longstanding civic exemptions. The rest of Israel demands and expects full participation.

Over the past couple of decades, there has been some slow progress toward integration, but it hasn't been dramatic. Until now.

One recent vignette: After the Oct. 7 massacre, Erez Eshel, an IDF special forces reserve officer and former deputy director of Israel's Education Ministry, made an uninvited appearance at several Haredi institutions. Clearly traumatized by what he had seen as one of the first fighters on the scene in Gaza, he urged his stunned audiences to aid their countrymen. Within two weeks, some 3,000 Haredi men had asked to join Israel's armed forces.

Most of the men Mr. Eshel addressed weren't conscription age. They, and their successors, have mainly been workingmen 26 or older, and their initial military service will last a few weeks rather than the normal three years. Yet the momentum generated by their actions has spread, for four reasons.

First, the sheer presence of Haredi soldiers in a range of settings and roles makes a deep impression. Second, actions to integrate many of them in a special IDF battalion have already borne fruit and raise the potential for a full Haredi brigade. Third, hundreds of noncombatant Haredim have helped gather, identify and bury, in accordance with religious law, the victims of Hamas's slaughter. Photographs, videos and interviews reflect the dedication of these Israelis sorting through the carnage, whether in IDF units or as volunteers in emergency response teams.

Fourth, in smaller but notable numbers, Haredim have provided food and supplies to army bases and military outposts. Responding to an extraordinary demand by soldiers of all stripes, yeshiva students have been commissioned to tie tzitzit (ritual tassels) to uniforms. The head of one of the largest Haredi charities visited Haredi soldiers and made a generous donation. IDF army bases have hosted Haredi rabbinical leaders. The list goes on.

In light of these developments, it is tempting to imagine that Israel has turned a corner and things will never be the same. People made similar predictions during the pandemic, and most of them weren't realized. We need to ensure that this time, things won't simply bounce back to where they were. Yes, we are fighting a war, and the bandwidth for still more causes is limited. But initiatives undertaken with even few resources can exert outsize influence, and the opportunity must be seized.

The Haredim themselves must champion a confident and realistic endorsement of lasting change. In seeking a wider and deeper affiliation with the nation, we need to learn to provide, and to propagate, the kind of energy that can reform Israel's stubbornly bifurcated system. It can't be "us vs. them." It has to be "us." Getting there will require investments of all kinds from all sides.

On the internal level—here I speak for myself and many colleagues—we need brave leaders. We need role models who demonstrate how Haredi values, far from being inconsistent with full participation in Israeli life, are consonant with it. We need the institutions—communal, educational, intellectual, religious, political—that can supply the organizational heft and popular backing essential to every true movement of hearts and minds.

Non-Haredim must recognize the potential before the momentum dissipates. The IDF should accept as many recruits as possible. There is no exaggerating how good it feels to see one's Haredi neighbor in an army uniform. The IDF could also work with civilian institutions to channel Haredi energy into real-life partnerships.

Israel's calamity has sparked several awakenings. It's obvious now that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however talented he may be, isn't the Jewish messiah. We have seen the face of the true enemy and reabsorbed the ancient lesson that there is no negotiating with evil. It must be destroyed. We have discovered that the international left—at least when it comes to Israel—will largely support its favored “underdog” along with its unquenchable thirst for Jewish blood.

These awakenings are critical, and we should take them to heart. But there is another one, with its own message and potential. In terms of Israel's future as a great society, it may be the most significant of all. Given the massive growth rate of the Haredi population—some 4% annually—the successful integration of this religiously intense and sociologically distinct group will have effects that might yet confer a blessing, wholly unforeseen, for generations. Once war is over and stability restored, Israel should bear this prospect in mind.

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