



## Would I Encourage My Daughter to Enlist in a Combat Unit of Israel Defense Forces?

### Is Army Service for Jewish Girls Acceptable in the Torah?

No matter what, I could never imagine myself carrying a gun. Even back in the eighties, when I was in my early twenties and we lived in a desolate new Yishuv – Metzad, surrounded by Arabs, I could not imagine it. Then, I didn't join my many female friends in a course in weapons training offered to the women. It was not because I didn't agree with women learning to shoot. I was well aware that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rav Ovadia Yosef allow women to bear arms on guard duty when there is a question of *pikuach nefesh* (saving lives). So why not? In my case, it would be more dangerous to try to use a gun than not. Any weapon in my hands could easily be used against me. I believe Israel is the only army in the world that recruits girls for combat units. Women in Israel must complete two years' compulsory service in the Israel Defense Forces. Some even choose to serve for three years alongside the men. These women want to demonstrate their support for the State of Israel while serving their country in the same way as the boys. They pride themselves in being treated completely equal in the Israeli army. Apparently, Israeli women are fighters – girls with character. Still, despite their dedication to serve their country they are admittedly not as physically strong as men. For over 20 years, Midreshet Lindenbaum offers Judaic studies combined with service in the IDF – Israel Defense Forces – for post-high school young women from abroad. One of their graduates even received an award for her significant service in the Intelligence Corps and her extraordinary contribution to the country. Midreshet Lindenbaum is under the auspices of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, known for being on the fringes of Orthodox Judaism. I would like to explore additional Torah views on women and army service.

### From the Bridal Canopy to the Military

Although army service is compulsory in Israel, among those who are unable or don't want to serve in the army, many choose (mainly Zionist-religious) to serve our country through *Sherut Leumi* (National Service) as volunteers in hospitals, schools, special education, administration, nursing homes, teens at risk, disadvantaged communities, immigrant assistance etc. Despite this option, every year, the army receives more and more religious female recruits, who not only enlist for traditional roles in the Education Corps but also join combat units. If I had a daughter, would I support her if she was to choose army service over *Sherut Leumi*? According to the Mishna, when it comes to an obligatory war, e.g., to defend the Land of Israel as well as protect Jewish lives from the enemies, not only is permission granted for women to participate, even a bride is compelled to leave her bridal canopy and join the army:

משנה מסכת סוטה פרק ח משנה ז

אמר רבי יהודה, במה דברים אמורים, במלחמת מצוה. אבל במלחמת חובה, הכל יוצאין, אפלו חתן מחדרו וכלה מחפתה:

Rabbi Yehuda says ...in an obligatory war all go out, even a bridegroom from his chamber and a bride from her canopy (*Mishnah Sotah* Chapter 8, Mishnah 7).

Yet, according to Rabbi Israel Lipschitz (1782–1860), it is not the role of a woman to serve in a combat role:

### תפארת ישראל /יכין/ על מסכת סוטה פרק ח משנה ז

[נב] וכלה מחופתה - אשה לאו בת מלחמה, רק לספק מזון ולתקן הדרכים אף היא יוצאת:

A BRIDE FROM HER CANOPY – A woman is not a daughter of war. She only goes out [to the army] in order to provide food and other services (Tiferet Yisrael, on *Mishna Sotah*, Chapter 8, Mishnah 7).

### **Biblical Female Leaders Avoid Using Weapons of Warfare**

Similarly, Devorah, the prophetess, expressed strong resistance to entering the army during the war with Yavin, king of Canaan (*Shoftim* 4:6-9). Although she initiated and led the entire process of the war, she, nevertheless, appointed Barak to be the General of the Army, while she herself never actively participated in the actual warfare (Rav Shlomo Aviner, *Eishet Chail, Women in the Bible* p. 138). Devorah did everything in her power to avoid any position in the army. We learn about Devorah's outlook on women and army service when she tells Barak that as a punishment for depending upon her, the final victory would not be through him, but through a woman. Devorah held by certain role divisions between men and women. She believed that it is the job of the man to be victorious in war. Therefore, she refused to enter combat, not because of a soft heart or a delicate soul, not because of sensitivity to blood or corpses. It was only her conviction of the correct role division between men and women that kept her from going to war. Devorah regarded the attempt to drag her into the battle as a weakness of Barak, the general. This flaw caused his dishonor so that the final victory took place through Yael – a woman (Rav Adin Steinhaltz, *Nashim b'Mikra* p. 53).

Why did Yael use a tent peg to kill the enemy? I don't even know how to stick a tent peg into the ground, let alone to use it to kill anyone. Why did Yael endanger herself by killing Sisera with this awkward, clumsy tool rather than using his sword? She risked her life in order to uphold the laws of modesty:

"*She lays her hands to the distaff*" (*Mishley* 31:19). This is Yael, who did not kill him with a weapon but with the peg of a tent, as it states, "*She put her hand to the tent peg.*" Why did she not kill him with a weapon? In order to fulfill that which it states in *Devarim* 22:5 "A woman shall not wear that which pertains to a man" (*Yalkut Shimoni* 31:964).

From the prohibition of cross-dressing (*Devarim* 22:5), Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov learns that a woman should not wear a military uniform or carry weapons of war (*Nazir* 59a; *Sifra* on *Devarim* 22:6; Targum Onkelos on *Devarim* 22:5).

### **Male Military Service with Exemption for the Levites**

In *Parashat Bamidbar*, military service seems to be strictly a male and not a female task. Half of the parasha (the entire chapter 1 and 2) is dedicated to enumerating the men suitable for joining the military:

ספר במדבר פרק א (ב) שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל למשפחתם לבית אבתם במספר שמות כל זכר לגלגלתם: (ג) מן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא בישראל תפקדו אתם לצבאתם אתה ואהרן:  
 "Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names. From twenty years old and upwards, all who are fit to go out to the army in Israel, you shall count them by their legions you and Aharon" (*Bamidbar* 1:2-3).

Note that the word זָכָר/*zachar* – ‘male’ is mentioned three times in connection with army service in the first chapter of the Book of *Bamidbar*. When I listened to the news today, driving home from the pool, I heard that the head of Yisrael Beitenu, Liberman, insists that the Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) also be drafted into the military. Otherwise, he refuses to join the coalition ([The Times of Israel, May 27, 2019](#)). This statement was made during the week of *Parashat Bamidbar* which describes the biblical male, military role, and in which the root צ-ב-א/*tzadik-beit-alef* is mentioned 37 times!

The last two chapters of *Parashat Bamidbar* deals with the tribe of Levi who is distinguished from the rest of the tribes by being exempt from army service. This is because of their duty to serve in the Tabernacle:

ספר במדבר פרק ג (ו) קָרַב אֶת מִטָּה לְוִי וְהִעֲמַדְתָּ אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְשָׂרְתוּ אֹתוֹ:  
 (ז) וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת מִשְׁמֶרְתוֹ וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת כָּל הָעֵדָה לִפְנֵי אֶהֱל מוֹעֵד לְעִבְד אֶת עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן:  
 (ח) וְשָׂמְרוּ אֶת כָּל כְּלֵי אֶהֱל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעִבְד אֶת עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן:

“Bring forth the tribe of Levi and present them before Aharon the kohen, that they may serve him. They shall keep his charge and the charge of the entire community before the Tent of Meeting, to perform the service of the Mishkan. They shall take charge of all the vessels of the Tent of Meeting and the charge of the children of Israel, to perform the service of the Mishkan” (*Bamidbar* 3:6-8).

### Being a Combat Soldier Defies Natural Feminine Compassion

Whether the claim of Chareidi men to have taken on the role of the tribe of Levites is justified or not (see Rambam *Hilchot Shemita and Yovel* 13:13) is a discussion for another time. Yet, surely, the daughters of Israel have a right to this army exemption for similar reasons to those of the tribe of Levi. Just as the Levites “perform the service of the Mishkan,” women traditionally perform the service of the home – the miniature Mishkan, where they are the chieftains who raise Jewish families. In addition, just as the Levites, women are closer to the Shechinah – the Divine Feminine Presence. The Shechinah expresses the feminine attributes of the Creator; thus, She provides us with motherly love, compassion, empathy, nurturing, and protection. This contrasts with masculine energy, which tends to be outgoing and assertive, sometimes even aggressive. Whereas, a woman integrates her spiritual, emotional and physical sides, a man’s physicality is often detached from his emotional and spiritual aspects. The masculine role, such as serving in the army, requires special focus and detachment from his emotions and family ties. In contrast, a woman naturally integrates all parts of her being, which facilitates her role as a multitasking mother. When a woman enlists in an army combat unit, she suppresses her natural feminine attributes and thrusts herself into the masculine mold. Although there are exceptions to the general differences between men and women, why would we want to encourage a Jewish woman to become more masculine, by taking on masculine, military roles and thereby detaching herself from her emotions and family ties?

The Talmud sums it up frankly, “It is the way of a man to make war, not the way of a woman” (*Kiddushin* 2b). In the *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, No. 16 (1988), Rabbi Alfred S. Cohen finds across-the-board rabbinic objections to compelling women to serve in the Israeli military. He quotes the Chazon Ish (Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz), who told David Ben-Gurion that Judaism would be morally endangered if there were women soldiers. For all these reasons, if I had a daughter, I would encourage her to choose *Sherut Leumi*, rather than entering the military. I would especially do anything in my power to prevent her from joining a combat unit.