

Why Chareidim are So Freaked Out About the Army

Disclaimer: The following is nothing more than my own personal views. I speak only for myself. My intention is not to try to change anybody's opinion on the matter; merely to explain what our own internal logic is.

Chareidi Ideology 101

Explaining why Chareidim react so strongly to serving in the army necessitates a background explanation of Chareidi ideology.

I view the State of Israel as a secular entity that's separate from the religious entity of Eretz Yisrael. I believe that Eretz Yisrael is holy, a special place, designated for Jews, our homeland, and that there's a religious preference to live there. However, I don't see Eretz Yisrael as being interchangeable with the political/legal entity called the State of Israel/Medinat Yisrael. To me, the State sits on top of the physical land of Eretz Yisrael like a hat sits on a head. Therefore, I don't view the State (and by extension, the army) as having religious significance. I view the State of Israel like I view the USA: it's a country, I'm its citizen, I live there, it provides me with services, and in general I follow its laws.

While I don't feel that the legal entity of the State of Israel is holy or religiously significant, I certainly believe that the Jews who live in it are! I make a distinction between the country and its inhabitants. Jews of every stripe and color are special, regardless of whether they are secular or religious. All Jews possess special souls, the attributes of mercy and kindness, an innate connection to G-d, and a desire to do what's right. It's undeniable that living in a place where much of the population is Jewish is an entirely different experience than living in a place populated mostly by non-Jews.

My first allegiance is to G-d and His rules as I perceive them. One of G-d's rules is "dina dimalchusa dina" – that one is obligated to follow the secular law of the land. Therefore, I follow secular laws meticulously. However, I view G-d as the general, and the secular government as a lower ranking officer. If a lower ranking officer orders me to disobey the general, I will follow the general's orders over those of the lower ranking officer.

Yes, there are scandals when Chareidim break secular laws. I view these crimes as an embarrassment, a disgrace, and a moral wrong, because one must follow secular rules unless there's a religious conflict. Just because someone looks like a Chareidi, that doesn't mean that they act as a Chareidi should. Chareidim are people, and like all people, some of us are nice, and some of us are jerks. Some do what they should, and some don't. Nobody is perfect, Chareidim included. We are a group of individuals, not a nameless faceless uniform bloc. I am confident that most Chareidim are good and nice people, and that the occasional much publicized jerk or charlatan is the exception rather than the rule.

I view the lifestyle of men learning Torah as much as practical to be a moral imperative. One who studies math gains mathematical knowledge, and one who learns science gains scientific knowledge. But learning Torah results in much more than the mere acquisition of knowledge. I believe that Torah as a collective whole is a spiritual force; and that when one learns Torah he connects to this force. The entire universe, in all of its incredible complexity, is a reflection of the Torah. Torah is intertwined with the fabric of the universe, and with G-d Himself. Learning Torah affects the physical and the spiritual realms. By learning Torah one generates the spiritual force that keeps the universe in existence; and brings blessing and protection to oneself, one's family, one's city, and the Jewish people. Learning Torah is G-d's will, and by doing His will, He, who controls everything will shower us with everything good.

Yes, this raises the age old question of why bad things happen to good people. It's a very good question. Moshe himself asked it. One answer, in a nutshell, is that we don't have the broad understanding of the past, present, future, physical world, and spiritual realms that G-d does. Just because something looks bad to us, that doesn't mean that it actually is bad.

What About the Army?

First, let me state that I have a lot of gratitude to the State of Israel, the Israeli Army, and the chayalim for all that they do for me. They provide me with many services that enable me to live here, something which I view as very significant. For example, I am very glad to have subsidized health care, and I make good use of it. As for the chayalim, they serve with self-sacrifice. At best they sacrifice years of their life for the common good. Unfortunately, sometimes they also sacrifice life and limb. I am well aware that chayalim have families who worry about them, and live without their fathers/sons/husbands/brothers when they serve, both in regular army service and in milu'im.

However, just because an army is needed, it doesn't follow that everyone needs to be in the army. It seems clear to me that army serves a twofold purpose: Firstly, it provides defense services. Secondly, it is culturally unifying. Army service is a rite of passage which bonds people together, makes them identify as Israeli, and gives them a propensity to refer to others as "Achi." I believe that the army doesn't actually need more manpower; and that therefore Chareidim are being drafted due to popular sentiment that we "share the burden," and in order to integrate us into mainstream Israeli society.

However, we do not want to be integrated. We deliberately choose a life centered around the study of Torah and incorporation of every facet of our existence into our service of G-d. At least, that's the goal. One of the main struggles in life is retaining sight of that goal. We view much of secular society as detrimental to our endeavor to live a life of holiness and divine service. Consequently, we voluntarily distance ourselves from secular culture and generally prefer to live, learn, and work amongst ourselves.

Therefore, the attempt to draft Chareidim en masse is seen as an attempt to forcibly change our entire culture and lifestyle, and integrate us into a society that we have ideological opposition to being a part of. It is viewed as an attempt to wrench thousands of men out of yeshiva, an act which is devastating to the spiritual wellbeing of both the individuals and the yeshiva network as a whole, which we view as our lifeblood. Not only do we place primary importance on men learning in yeshiva, but we view the army as an environment fraught with spiritual dangers. We are fighting for everything that we hold sacred and dear.

Why Chareidim are not Parasitic Leaches

The widespread Chareidi aversion to army service, coupled with our preference to learn rather than work, raises the obvious question of how Chareidim contribute to Israeli society. It certainly seems like we are parasitic: supported by taxes of hardworking Israelis and sacrifices of soldiers without giving anything in return.

However, I believe that Chareidim contribute a lot to Israeli society. The following are a few examples: First and foremost, the country and people of Israel need all of the help that they can get. I believe that G-d controls everything. Therefore, if we want things to be good, we should stay on His good side. What G-d wants is Torah learning, prayer, and adherence to His laws. We Chareidim are busy working on that.

Secondly, it is a fallacy that Chareidim don't pay taxes. Israel has a 17% sales tax. We pay that tax on every item that we buy to feed and care for our (typically) large families. Other taxes, such as a tax on gas, get passed on to us, the consumers, in the form of higher prices on things such as bus fare. Furthermore, many Chareidim do work and pay taxes. Especially if the husband is learning, the wife is often working. Taxes are automatically deducted from paychecks.

Thirdly, Israel is a socialist county. As such, the government provides funding to myriad causes, and subsidizes many different services and amenities. I believe that the Chareidi sector is not receiving more money than any other sector, and is likely allocated less. I assure you that we are not living the good life on government money. Even with aliya benefits, the sum total of all the money that we personally receive from the government doesn't even come near covering the cost of our groceries, not to mention rent and other expenses.

Fourthly, Chareidim play a large role in the war of demographics: I believe that we are the only group keeping up with the Arab birthrate. By extension, our need for housing creates "facts on the ground." For example, I live in Beitar Illit, an exclusively Chareidi city in the West Bank (near the Gush) with a rapidly growing population currently numbering roughly 50,000 people. People from nearby settlements come to Beitar for things such as grocery shopping and medical care. Kiryat Sefer, also known as Modi'in Illit, is another exclusively Chareidi city in the West Bank whose population is similar to Beitar's in size and growth.

Add conclusion!