



PERSPECTIVES

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A Soldier, Not a “Child”

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When we ask young men and women to give everything they have and more for the sake of their country and their people, we cannot at the same time see them as kids. This is by no means a denial that every soldier is in fact a son or daughter to their parents.

In a short, clear sentence – “An 18-year-old man serving in the army is not ‘everyone’s child’” – IDF Chief-of-Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot issued a formative message to the Israel Defense Forces and Israeli society as a whole: a member of the IDF is first and foremost a soldier. Eizenkot’s words should be welcomed, enshrined in the canonical utterances of the IDF for generations to come, along with famous speeches like former Chief-of-Staff Moshe Dayan’s 1956 eulogy over the grave of Roi Rothberg, the security officer at Kibbutz Nahal Oz who was killed in an ambush.

It was actually the nationalist-right circles who found fault with Eizenkot’s words. Aside from the criticism of the timing – a day before the verdict in the trial of Sgt. Elor Azaria – they wondered why his remarks were met with such support among leaders of the Israeli public discourse “on Azaria’s watch,” but not on similar earlier occasions.

By contrast, I saw the Chief-of-Staff’s remarks as an opportunity to reassert the centrality of the IDF in the Israeli consciousness as a common sphere for national identification transcending all sectors. Every soldier is of course a son or daughter to their parents. The Chief-of-Staff certainly wasn’t trying to invalidate those basic ties. And it should be recalled that the IDF has undergone an important change in its openness to parental intervention. At times that openness can be a burden to commanders, but in many cases, the cooperation is helpful.

One winter day on the Golan Heights, when I was deputy commander of the 36th Division, a worried father appeared at division headquarters and told us he had just returned his son and his son's friend to the Paratroopers Battalion after the two had showed up at home, AWOL. The father asked me to look into whether his son's complaints about his commander were right, or whether he was just weak and possibly unfit for the burden of combat service. I went to the battalion, talked with the son, and was duly impressed. I got back to the father to give him my impression that his son was fine, and that he wasn't the only one to have complained about his commanding officer. In my opinion, the matter needed looking into.

Former Chief-of-Staff Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz, who at time was in charge of the brigade, got the message, conducted his investigation, and decided to end the commanding officer's career. The decision wasn't made because of "our children's" sensitivity, but because of the unit's need to function properly and carry out its missions. That was and remains the spirit of the IDF.

"Our children" can be understood with some generosity of spirit, insofar as it expresses support for our soldiers, our fear for their safety, and our expectation that they will return from their missions safe and sound. Eizenkot was not trying to take any of that away from the public. He was trying to underscore the scale of expectations we have of a soldier: the meaning of the demand that when put to the test, he or she will give everything they have and more for their people and their homeland.

There is no way to demand this from someone we persist in seeing as a child. When young men and women join the ranks of the IDF, they obligate themselves to rise to the moment when they will be put to the ultimate test. At that point, as David Ben-Gurion stressed, the fate of the nation will rest on their shoulders. In those moments, which can occur without warning, being a soldier is a total commitment. The soldier facing such a crisis represents the nation as it is put to a fateful test.

Plenty of IDF soldiers across the generations have met those tests successfully. Such was the heroism of Second Lt. Zerubavel Horowitz, the armored commander who broke through roadblocks with the Nebi Daniel convoy in the 1948 War of Independence. The convoy was en route from Gush Etzion to Jerusalem when it was ambushed, resulting in an extended battle. When Horowitz realized his vehicle was cut off, surrounded by Arab attackers, he covered his soldiers as they retreated to the rest of the forces, and stayed where he was to protect the wounded. When hope of rescue ran out, he blew up his vehicle, along with himself and his soldiers. He was awarded a posthumous Medal of Valor.

That is what war looks like when it gets tough. It is not a nice, sheltered place for children.

How and when did IDF soldiers become "our children"? This view is a product of the wider neoliberal worldview that has swept the western world over the past few decades. The crux of the question can be seen in the stories we tell ourselves about why enlistment in the IDF is mandatory.

The liberal civilian view of the world sees the individual and his or her freedom as the basis of social existence, making compulsory military service a burden, like paying taxes. The burden is justified by the cost-benefit formula: everyone must enlist in his or her turn so as to be able to fulfill themselves later on in life. All along the way, the individual interest remains at the core.

By contrast, in a mobilized society, as Israel's Jewish community used to be prior to the establishment of the state and during its first two decades of existence, the leading interest is the national one. According to this point of view, the needs of the collective not only take precedence over individual interests but give meaning and content to individual lives. In this scenario, compulsory military service is not simply required by law. It is first and foremost the privilege and opportunity to take part in a national responsibility. When young men and women enlist with that privilege in mind, they cannot accept that anyone continue to treat them as "children."

Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Horev tells a story about the end of the battle for Mount Zion in 1948, when he and two other company commanders in the Palmah came to the Jewish Agency offices in Jerusalem. They went into the office of then acting foreign minister Golda Meir, sat down, lit cigarettes and waited. When she came in she asked: "Boys, what are you doing here?" They answered, "If it's not clear to those of you in the leadership that we're going to win, we came to tell you that we're winning."

To my mind, that was an expression of the consciousness of shared responsibility. This is the frame of mind a young soldier needs to have when the going gets tough. The Chief-of-Staff's words are an opportunity to clarify to all sectors of society how we as parents should treat the younger generation, even after their military service is complete. How long can we see them as "children"?

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