

Soldiers and Scholars: Ritual Dilemmas among National Religious Combat Soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces

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Abstract

This article explores how the practice of Jewish rabbinic law within the combat ranks of the Israel Defense Forces can be used as an ethnographic medium through which anthropologists may better contextualize the social and political tensions that characterize Jewish religious nationalism in Israel. We argue that national religious combat soldiers rarely turn to rabbinic legal tracts, or to the overlapping levels of military and civilian rabbinic leadership in their immediate efforts to resolve the everyday ritual dilemmas of their service. Rather, these dilemmas are primarily addressed and (always imperfectly) resolved on the small-scale intra-unit level. Through this ethnographic window into the religious and ritual aspects of military life, this article ultimately argues that the experience of political piety in Israel (and perhaps the wider Middle East) hinges not so much upon the power play between opposing religious and secular institutions but rather in the daily ambivalences and ambiguities experienced by individual adherents as they go about their daily lives.

Keywords

IDF, Halakha, Religion, State

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Introduction

Avital's voice crackled over the poor cellular connection. "Shai is on his way to the base," she began tentatively, "please don't tell him I asked you this, he'd just be too shy to ask you himself. Shai [her husband] forgot his white Yarmulke at home, do you have a spare one he could wear for Shabbat?" It was a hot Friday afternoon in early November, a few hours before the onset of the weekly Sabbath. Nehemia [the first author] and Shai were in the first week of a month-long stint of reserve duty in the West Bank.

Resting behind Avital's request on behalf of her husband were the many ritual restrictions and obligations of the Sabbath day that soldiers who are observant of Jewish law must ignore while on operational duty.¹ Shai would often comment to Nehemia on how these operational provisions, though necessary, can so easily cause a religious soldier to devalue the unique sanctity and serenity of the Sabbath day. Moreover, the two had spoken many times about how crass, distant, and harsh the social atmosphere of the Israeli military can seem to religiously observant soldiers, especially on the Sabbath. In response, Shai had a custom of donning a clean white knitted Yarmulke specifically on the Sabbath. The white Yarmulke with its colorful blue design knitted into the edges contrasted with his drab olive-green uniform and seemed to symbolize the many ritual complexities and social contradictions of taking an active part in the culture of a secular military as well as in the wider Israeli polity that it represents.

This article offers an ethnographic analysis of the ritual dilemmas and social conflicts that are generated through the practice of Jewish law within the combat units of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). We argue that religious nationalist soldiers in the IDF use *halakhic*—or everyday rabbinic, ritual, and legal (Ivry 2010)—dilemmas as a way of negotiating between personal religious fidelities and broader civic responsibilities. Through the case study of the everyday practice of rabbinic law in military spaces, we demonstrate how religious nationalism ought to be imagined not as a show of force over secular institutions but rather as a series of interpersonal and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed (yet never fully resolved) by political pietists in varying contexts. In this way—to borrow a classic ethnographic line from Edward Sapir—the social tensions generated by Jewish political piety are located squarely in the ethical "interactions of specific individuals" (Sapir 1932, 236) acting within particular social contexts, rather than in the broader power dynamics that occur between "religious" and "state" institutions.

Anthropologists have long explored the nature of violence in national and ethnic conflicts (Krohn-Hansen 1994; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Ethnographers of the Israeli military

have specifically grappled with the ethical dilemmas inherent in the act of killing (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005), the larger political (Allen 2012) and gendered (Lavie 2019) frameworks of military violence, along with the many other physical forms of violence that have become so much a part of the IDF's policing activities within the Palestinian civilian population centers of the West Bank (Ben-Ari 1989; Bornstein 2001; Gazit and Ben-Ari 2017; Grassiani 2013). In a more limited sense, anthropologists have also been interested in the everyday lives of the soldiers who take both an active and structural part in executing forms of political violence in conflict zones (Feige and Ben-Ari 1991; Ben-Ari and Sion 2005; Stern and Ben-Shalom 2019). Much less ethnographic attention, however, has been given to the religious and ritualistic modalities of military life, that is to say, to the ways in which religious fidelities and ritual observances among combat soldiers in the field might relate to broader social and political tensions within Israeli society. In this way, the anthropological discourse surrounding Israeli militarism (Kimmerling 1993; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999; Helman 1999) has elided one central component of the Israeli military experience itself.

Previous social scientific and ethnographic scholarship on the nexus between nationalism and religion within Israeli society has focused on the ways in which the latter attempts to influence—in both passive and active ways—the national and ideological identity of the State of Israel. Kravel-Tovi (2017), for example, has shown how religious Zionist rabbinic agents attempt to shape the religious, national, and moral character of the State itself by taking an active part in the State of Israel's conversion program to Judaism. Others have seen religious Zionists solidifying their status in Israeli society through the many premilitary rabbinic academies, whose goal it is to prepare and push religious Zionist youth into active and meaningful service in the command and officer ranks of the IDF (Lebel 2015, 2018). Yagil Levy (2011, 2014) has gone further in delineating the more proactive strategies through which religious Zionists may seek to “theocratize” the once secular and politically neutral Israeli military.

Moreover, both scholars and lay observers have noted a sharp and steady rise in the sheer numbers of soldiers coming from religious Zionist backgrounds. In 2003, it was anecdotally noted for example that nearly 60 percent of all graduates from the initial NCO training course were from the national religious sector (Cohen 2004).² In 2010, it was believed that junior and midlevel officers from national religious backgrounds outnumber in some combat units their secular counterparts by nearly three to one (Cohen 2010). The rise in the critical mass of national religious soldiers has also increased the sectorial demands that they have begun to place on the

day-to-day functions of the IDF (Levy 2011, 2014; Harel 2011; Drory 2009; Elbshen 2013; Lubell 2016).

We argue, however, that a unitary focus on these sectoral tensions tends to elide the more nuanced ways in which the military as a “state institution” can in actuality present a deep and existential contrast to the pietistic sensibilities of the religious Zionist public. By focusing exclusively on these power dynamics, the underlying personal, pietistic, and social issues at stake in the conflict between “religion” and “state” within the IDF—and Israeli society more broadly—are lost to anthropological investigation. By taking an ethnographic look at the ways in which national religious combat soldiers resolve many of the everyday rabbinic and ritual dilemmas of their service, we show how these questions can serve as a medium through which these soldiers—and the communities they represent—experience the tensions between “synagogue” and state in their own daily lives.

The research for this study was based on the autoethnographic observations gathered by the first author during his own enlisted and reserve service spanning the years of 2001–2017. In contrast to traditional participant observation, where a cultural barrier (however porous) exists between the researcher and his or her field of study, in “autoethnography,” the researcher is a full member of the “research group or setting” (Anderson 2006, 75; Chang 2016).

Autoethnography as a method offers a distinct advantage in studying everyday experiences in Israeli military contexts. Over the years, both the IDF’s Spokesperson’s office and its Behavioral Sciences Unit have been reticent to allow civilian researchers the kind of long-term and intimate access to military units that is a traditional part of most anthropological studies (Stern and Ben-Shalom 2019; Ben-Ari and Levy 2014). As a result, anthropologists must find other ways to gain ethnographic access to military sites and experiences. This article follows some of the seminal Israeli military ethnographies such as Aran’s (1974) analysis of military parachuting, Ben-Ari’s (1998) study of policing operations during the First Intifada, and Yaron’s (2016) study of IDF snipers that have all utilized their own military service as unique autoethnographic opportunities to conduct research on the IDF in ways that circumvent official censorship. Additionally, these observations were supplemented by a dozen interviews with national religious combat soldiers currently serving in the IDF reserves, along with an analysis of relevant textual material such as rabbinic booklets and halakhic texts.

Religious Zionism and Military Service

On September 9, 1949, the Israeli parliament passed its first Security Services Law that mandated two years of military service for all male Israeli citizens

and one year for female citizens (Knesset Website 1949). Currently males serve for thirty-two months and females for two years. Although the IDF is becoming a more “professionalized” force (Cohen 2004, 2; Libel 2013), Israel’s early and continued focus on conscripted military service has shaped the ways in which the military relates to the individual needs of its enlisted soldiers. Specifically, the IDF goes to great lengths to meet the religious and cultural needs of the diverse (albeit mostly Jewish) populations who join its ranks by force of law. In this way it is often difficult to separate “civilian” religious concerns from classically “military” contexts. IDF soldiers and officers have come to expect an acceptance of their own halakhic (rituo-legal) needs on the part of the military to an extent that is rarely seen in other Western militaries.

The practice of rabbinic law on the part of these national religious soldiers and the dilemmas that practice generates are one of the issues “that matter desperately, [and which] provides local worlds with their immense power to absorb attention, orient interest, and direct action” (Kleinman 1997, 327). Law, as Clifford Geertz put it, “doesn’t just mop up, it defines. It doesn’t just correct, it makes possible. What it defines . . . is an important force in shaping human behaviour and giving it sense, lending it significance, point and direction” (1996, 35). Traditional Jewish law as expressed through Halakha takes this paradigm a step further. Halakha as a ‘cultural system’ not only lends significance to human behavior but it also has the capacity to actualize “ethical norms, historical experiences, and theological postulates” within wider social contexts (Twersky 1974, 70; Woolf 2012). As Chaim Saiman writes, “Rabbinic theology places Halakha at the center of its intellectual universe. As the primacy of halakha and its study grew, so did the incentives to channel artistic, literary and political impulses towards halakhic debate and discussion” (2018, 138). In this way, cultural discourses—that in other societies might be relegated to the realms of art, philosophy, history, drama, or literature—are channeled through the prism of Jewish Law.

For Jewish religious nationalists in Israel and the West Bank, the social experience of rabbinic law rests alongside other national and even mystical concerns. Israeli religious Zionists, broadly understood, see in the establishment of Jewish political sovereignty in the land of Israel both nationalistic and theological import. For them, the creation of the State of Israel is the first political step toward not just national, but ultimately universal, redemption (Stern 2012; Kravel-Tovi 2018; Ravitzky 1996).

For these Jewish religious nationalists, service in the IDF is just as much a civic duty as it is a sacred calling. Through military service, a religious Zionist not only becomes a member of Israeli civil society but quite literally becomes a part of the larger drama of Jewish history (Stern 2014; Sadan

2007, 2012; Cohen 1999). Major General (res.) Yiftach Ron Tal—widely seen as being one of the first national religious soldiers to serve on the General Staff (Beker 2002)—went further in delineating the ways in which service in the IDF reflects certain spiritual values that are crucially important for national religious combat soldiers:

It's not that the army is a "good place" for a religious soldier, it's a classic place for a religious soldier. It is a place where a religious soldier can express some of the most cherished aspects in the realm of faith and values.

The IDF, however, is also a state institution that echoes some of religious Zionism's most intimate fears. For religious Zionist youth, it is seen as a period of time where one's ritual practices and spiritual fidelities are first tested in a serious and sustained manner. For many, the military is the first place where they come into close personal contact with individuals who are fundamentally different from themselves, including members of the opposite sex. Rabbinic figures often warn their students and acolytes to be wary of the effects of secular military culture on their religious and ritual standards. In this context, the correct and proper observance of those standards has become a source of angst for national religious soldiers, who through these practices find themselves balancing between fidelity to faith and loyalty to the State.

This balancing act is seen by some rabbinic figures as an opportunity to disseminate their religious ideals and fervor to the broader secular Israeli society. Rabbi Eli Sadan, rabbinic dean of the Bnei David [Sons of David] premilitary academy in the West Bank Settlement of Eli, described this dynamic in a series of booklets he published titled *A Direction for Religious Zionism*. Sadan is a highly influential figure within Israeli religious Zionism. His premilitary rabbinic academy is considered an elite institution, and many of his students have become senior combat officers in the IDF. The booklets Sadan authored were widely available at the time of publication (some were distributed for free), and most can now be found online.

As he wrote regarding the meaning of Halakha in relation to Jewish nationalism, "There is a full significance to the four cubits of Halakha [a classic rabbinic phrase denoting 'the strict confines of Jewish law'] as it manifests itself in the life of the people in its Land [of Israel]. The Torah guides the life of the state and creates a 'Holy Nation'" (Sadan 2012, 12). Jewish law and values—what Sadan calls "Torah"—ought to serve as a guide for the State and generates a sanctified polity. At the same time, Rabbi Sadan has come out in strong opposition to religious coercion in its legal or even informal contexts.

Pietistic changes in Israeli society can only be achieved via “free will, through the eternal spark that is hidden inside the heart of every Jew” (Sadan 2016, 31). In practical terms, what Sadan means is that a halakhic lifestyle on the part of religious Zionist IDF soldiers ought to serve as a personal example for their secular comrades:

Don't try to convince anyone of the righteousness of your path, and never try to prove that you are better than anyone. Just do this: live your life to the fullest depths of faith and happiness. (Sadan 2016, 29)

For Sadan, the personal example of religious Zionist soldiers practicing a pious lifestyle in accordance with Jewish law within the military barracks is a small but necessary step toward shaping the wider Israeli society. The guidance that can be found however in a popular booklet is a far cry from the reality of the military barracks. In cultivating this “personal example,” religious Zionist soldiers must interpret the proper and pious observance of rabbinic law, alongside the desires, needs, and wishes of their secular comrades.

Rabbinic Frameworks in the IDF

Various institutional frameworks compete with each other for the role of safeguarding the spiritual and halakhic well-being of religious Zionist servicemen as they interact with other sectors of Israeli society. Firstly, the IDF itself has institutionalized orthodox rabbinic law within its military protocols. The IDF's own Chaplaincy Corp is officially known as the “Military Rabbinate,” and the military's Chief Rabbi serves as an officer on the General Staff with the rank of Brigadier General. Unlike the governmental rabbinate, which is strongly aligned with Israel's ultraorthodox population, the IDF rabbinate is currently staffed with clergy who stem from Israel's religious Zionist community. While military rabbis are most notably responsible for handling the remains of fallen soldiers, their most common task is the maintenance of Orthodox rabbinic standards regarding the observance of the Sabbath as well as the kosher dietary laws on all military bases (Cohen, Kampinsky, and Rosman-Stollman 2016).

Second are the quasi-public rabbinic seminaries that many national religious students attend before their induction into the military. The seminaries offer pedagogical instruction in Judaism and are seen as providing the pietistic direction necessary in aiding students to withstand the spiritual rigors of service (Lebel 2016). These seminaries operate in a variety of frameworks for male students. Some, known as *mechinot* (*mechina* in singular), offer

year-long programs at the culmination of which the students are conscripted into the military for the standard three years. Others, known as *Yeshivot hesder*, operate on a different basis. There, students study in the yeshiva for a period of over a year. They are then inducted into the military for a period of about sixteen months. The rest of their service is spent within the yeshiva.

Within the military unit itself, these students serve in frameworks known as the “hesder platoon.” These are groupings of some twenty to thirty men from various yeshivot who serve together in the military. The hesder platoon remains together for the period of basic and advanced training (about eight months). Following that period, all soldiers transfer into their regular battalions. In this way, a Hesder student can very easily find himself serving alone in a larger unit of secular soldiers. These premilitary rabbinic seminaries, along with the military rabbinate itself, publish manuals (some pocket-sized, easily meant to fit in one’s rucksack or combat webbing) that discuss and delineate how a combat soldier is meant to behave when facing certain halakhic dilemmas (Lebel 2016; Cohen 2007).

Some political scientists have borrowed from midcentury anthropological literature to understand how these rabbinic institutions act as “culture brokers” (Redfield 1956, 101–2; Wolf 1956) between the operational demands of the military and the spiritual needs of individual soldiers (Segal 1986; Cohen 1993, 1999, 2007; Rosman-Stollman 2008, 2009, 2014). An alternative frame of analysis, however, may be borrowed from more recent anthropological studies on the relationship between rabbinic law and contemporary medical practices. Indeed, the parallel between the ways in which Halakha interacts with both medicine and the military can be quite instructive, as many of the halakhic dilemmas experienced by medical professionals (work on the Sabbath, long hours without sleep, etc.) are also experienced by military personnel.

In her work on the use of artificial reproductive technologies and prenatal testing among Orthodox Jewish Women in Israel, Tsipy Ivry (2010, 2013, 2015) has noted how triadic relationships between patients, their doctors, and rabbinic advisors have expanded the role of rabbinic authority in medical practices. Here, rabbinic advice in medical contexts acts less as a cultural mediator than as one element in a complex struggle for power and authority (Ivry 2010). Ivry’s approach highlights how the interinstitutional conflicts generated by the practice of rabbinic law can often compete with other forms of secular authority in Israel. This approach offers a parallel (albeit an imperfect one) to the ways in which rabbinic authority both competes with and works alongside the military command for the hearts and minds of religious Zionist soldiers. Our ethnographic findings expand on this argument to examine not so much the power dynamics between

institutions but rather the modes through which individuals grapple with rabbinic legal dilemmas in ways that often ignore or even undermine both rabbinic and military authority.

Orthodox Jewish women utilizing artificial reproductive technologies and prenatal testing actively seek out rabbinic advice in their consultations with medical professionals. In contrast, our research demonstrates how Religious Zionist combat soldiers do not seek out institutional advice—be it civilian or military—in their attempts to grapple with the everyday halakhic dilemmas of service. In the darkness of a nighttime patrol, at a checkpoint, or even in the barracks, religious Zionist soldiers have little access to rabbinic advice or halakhic manuals. To resolve halakhic dilemmas, these soldiers have only each other, their secular comrades, and the IDF command structure that connects the two. Using these resources, they are able to work through halakhic complications in surprising and sometimes subversive ways. This ethnographic observation suggests that the locus for an “overlap between state and religion” (Ivry 2010, 676) within Israeli society occurs at the level of individual experience rather than within more institutionalized frameworks. In the following sections, we ethnographically trace the various ways in which these religious Zionist combat soldiers work through their ritual dilemmas and in so doing refract larger personal, theological, social, and national experiences.

Gender Relations

The Case of a Woman’s Voice

Questions of gender often generate an intense and ongoing storm of controversy and debate within the Israeli media regarding the contemporary religious and ideological character of the IDF. The issue of gender is particularly resonant in relation to the general halakhic regulation—commonly known as *kol isha* (a woman’s voice)—that prohibits men from listening to female vocalists. The claim is that the feminine voice when sung provides a forbidden sexual enticement for men. The issue of *kol isha* in IDF combat units has become a moment in which the larger institutional frameworks of Israeli society—synagogue and state—are seen to clash.

In September 2011, for example, ten national religious cadets in the IDF’s prestigious combat officer’s course walked out of an event commemorating Operation Cast Lead after a female military vocalist began a solo performance (Novick 2011). As a result, four of the cadets were expelled from the course after defiantly asserting to military authorities that they would take the same action should a similar situation arise in the future. At the time, the IDF

command argued that while it is necessary to respect certain basic religious standards of all soldiers, it would be impossible to recognize the maximum religious standards for every soldier (Harel 2011). The Israeli Chief Rabbinate, however, and many premilitary rabbinic seminaries called upon the IDF to find some solution for the religious requirements of some of their national religious soldiers (Nahshoni 2011; Hollander 2014). Israeli academics and left-leaning politicians have argued that calls for such religious “toleration” on the part of the IDF only work to further remove a female presence from Israeli civil society (Yefet 2016). As Yagil Levy argues, these rabbinic authorities seek to “theologize the military culture” in such a way as to ensure male dominance not only over the military but within their own religious communities (2010, 203).

What was lost, however, in the ensuing controversy was that, from a practical perspective at least, this particular incident was far from unique in the ongoing debates around gender and religion in the Israeli military. For decades now, a growing number of national religious combat soldiers have been instructed by their respective rabbinic authorities that it is indeed forbidden to listen to female solo vocalists. Some have been advised to simply leave the hall where the performance is taking place, while others have been told to wear earplugs used for target practice (commonly carried by combat soldiers particularly during periods of training) during the performance.

For their part, the military rabbinate has offered its own interpretation of the degree to which this standard ought to be implemented in social groups. Although most national religious combat soldiers serve in exclusively male units and have only limited contact with females, there are more than a few instances where female vocalists may perform in front of male soldiers. These may include official military or state ceremonies, semi-official events organized by the brigade or regiment, and recreational morale-building evenings organized by the junior commanders themselves. The military rabbinate recognizes these three separate contexts such that religious soldiers are instructed to remain during performances at state ceremonies, while commanders are asked to release soldiers during semiofficial brigade or regimental events. Commanders, however, are ordered to release religious soldiers from attending the third category of social events (Hollander 2014). While this ruling seems specific enough to include most instances of female vocal performances, there is often no clear line between semiofficial brigade events and recreational morale-building evenings.

In practice, despite rabbinic dicta and military regulations, national religious soldiers develop a variety of ways of grappling with this halakhic dilemma. That is, some will leave the event, but others will sit and listen, or lower their heads to refrain from looking. Ilan, a national religious soldier in

an armored brigade, for example, remembered how his unit had organized a recreational evening for the entire brigade.³ The Brigade Commander had invited a military band to perform during the evening. In addition, he also invited a private band that did include a solo performance by a female singer who, in Ilan's mind, was dressed immodestly.

Ilan noted that according to the military rabbinate, his commanders were obligated to release him from attending this event (or this portion of the event). Contrary, however, to most rabbinic advice and military directives, Ilan decided to remain seated. At the time, Ilan had just finished his period of training. He had already advanced alone into the ranks of a regular armored brigade, without his comrades from the Hesder yeshiva. Citing a biblical verse from Proverbs 3:4 "you will find favor and a good name in the sight of God and man," Ilan noted how he "always tried to be on good terms with everyone in my company." Ilan said that at times one can have a greater religious impact both on the unit and on one's own development as a practicing and pietistic Jew by not choosing the strictest interpretation of Jewish law "that would put me against my unit."

This decision to remain seated was certainly not unique. Other national religious soldiers offered a similar rationale for remaining at events that included female vocalists. Tzvi, a national religious infantryman who had studied and served within a Hesder unit, remembered how his entire unit had remained during a similar performance.⁴ The unit had finished their period of training and had gathered for a ceremony that included recreational music performed by nonmilitary female soloists. "When it started we just looked at each other," Tzvi explained, "we didn't have to say anything, we knew it was a problem." Although the halakhic dilemma was immediately apparent, none of the soldiers got up to leave. For Tzvi and the others with him, it simply was not comfortable creating a conflict within the larger unit. "We glanced back and forth at each other, and we just knew that this wasn't the issue that we wanted to make a stand on." For Ilan and Tzvi, the social dynamics of their own units determined how they (and their national religious comrades) grappled with this controversial halakhic dilemma.

Neither Ilan nor Tzvi attempted to consult with rabbinic authorities either during or after the incidents. Even years later, recounting the events, neither of them cited rabbinic sources to support or contradict their actions. For them, the halakhic dilemma of listening to female vocalists was one that ought to be addressed within the unit itself. At stake here, however, was more than just unit cohesion, or the Jewish laws concerning modesty. On the line were these soldiers' desire to balance fidelity to religious and ritual precepts with their obligations both to the military and to Israeli society more broadly understood. These ritual dilemmas highlight the ways in

which the cultivation of pious “sensibilities in the everyday” (Das 2012, 145) become intertwined with social issues of group conformity and in that way act as the locus of much broader conversations pertaining to the role of religion in Israeli civil life.

Aside from the specific prohibition concerning female vocalists, religious Zionist combat soldiers experience tensions surrounding the masculine and oftentimes overtly sexualized character of service. Anthropologists have long noted the hegemonic masculine nature of IDF service (Lomsky-Feder and Rapaport 2003; Sasson-Levy. 2008; Perez and Sasson-Levy 2015) and have observed how masculinity and “manhood” have often been “equated to warriorhood” (Kaplan and Ben-Ari 2000, 402; Gill 1997; Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978). Little has been written, however, on the local ways in which political piety interacts with notions of masculinity and warriorhood. The rising numbers of national religious men serving in the commanding levels of IDF combat units points to the distinct acuteness of this ethnographic lacuna.

For religious Zionist combat soldiers, the kinds of misogynistic “rhetoric of sexual performance” (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005, 664) that is so much a part of military masculinity stands in stark contrast to their own pious sensibilities. On any given Friday night in IDF dining rooms throughout the country, enlisted combat soldiers can be heard singing morale-boosting songs around the festive Sabbath dinner table. In past decades, these songs were almost always raunchy peans about prostitutes, girlfriends back home, and sometimes even the supposed sexual attributes of the female administrative staff of the unit itself. While in recent years these songs have been officially banned in IDF combat units, they can still be regularly heard when the officers and junior commanders have left the dining hall or during the more informal moments surrounding field exercises.

For national religious soldiers, these songs are shocking. For them, the sabbath meal is traditionally celebrated by the singing of sacred hymns coupled with rabbinic homilies. As Amit, a national religious infantryman observed, “Listen, I came to the army from yeshiva, suddenly people are standing on tables and singing songs about sex during the Sabbath evening meal.” At the same time, however, there is also a good deal of moral ambivalence regarding the extent to which these religious Zionist soldiers ought to take an active and meaningful part not just in the professional aspects of the military but in experiencing its cultural environment as well. As Ilan noted, “the songs did make me feel uncomfortable. But I also wanted to be a part of the unit. And so, maybe I didn’t sing, but I didn’t walk out either. And sometimes I even smiled.”

Ben-Ari and Sion (2005) have viewed the bawdy social atmosphere of the military as a site for the cultivation of masculinities in all-male

environments. While this is certainly true, for national religious combat soldiers, the bawdy social atmosphere complicates traditional understandings of “hegemonic masculinities” in military contexts (Perez and Sasson-Levy 2015, 464; Connell 1995; Hinojosa 2010). For national religious combat soldiers, misogynistic songs contrast with their own individual pious self-understandings. Through these songs, “military masculinity” becomes a site of ritual and ethical conflict that highlights the pressing moral and experiential issues at stake when personal piety confronts competing forms of social and civic engagements.

Sabbath and Holiday Prohibitions

The Case of the Silent Radio

To be sure, during interviews most enlisted religious Zionist combat soldiers would claim that there are so few women serving in and around their units that specific halakhic dilemmas related to gender rarely arise.⁵ Soldiers spoke of more common ritual dilemmas that revolve around the everyday prohibitions related to Sabbath and holiday observances. Here the halakhic problem of determining when a normally prohibited action is operationally “necessary” becomes a staging ground for a much broader set of ambiguities regarding the conflict between pietistic and national fidelities among national religious soldiers.

On a chilly Friday night in late November of 2012, Nehemia along with his six-man reserve military patrol exited the front gate of a northern West Bank settlement. On that Sabbath evening, they were to hike for an hour up to a nearby rocky hilltop where they had orders to observe and prevent any infiltrations into the settlement. Between sundown on Friday night and sundown on Saturday night, religiously observant Jews are forbidden from kindling or extinguishing fire. In practical terms, this means that one is forbidden from using any electrical or mechanical device that produces a spark (Jachter and Broyde 1993). Life-threatening situations, however, are the primary exception to these Sabbath prohibitions (Schaefer and Levi 1995; Greenberger and Mor 2016). According to the IDF Rabbinate and most rabbinic authorities, all “operational activities” in the IDF (as opposed to training activities) fall under this category. Yet the practical question remains, what is the precise definition of an “operational activity,” and who has the military authority to classify actions as “operational”?

This is a heady question that has the capacity to generate a good deal of social tension within a military unit, and political tension beyond the unit. As a former deputy chief rabbi of the Israeli navy noted in an interview, in

theory, “the combat commander on the ground has the sole authority to define what actions ought to be deemed ‘necessary’ operational activities.” Theory, however, is not always reflected in reality. In practice, soldiers, their commanders, and the military rabbinate do not always agree on what specific activities ought to be deemed “operational,” and thus necessary to be performed on the Sabbath. These kinds of situations are very real dilemmas for observant soldiers, and in practice, they often make these decisions for themselves without recourse to specific rabbinic authorities, or even rabbinic texts.

As six middle-aged and breathless reservists reached their destination, the commander of the patrol knelt down on one knee and attempted to radio their position into the war room. While the patrol was correctly positioned, it could not achieve radio contact. When this happens—as it too often does with reservist IDF equipment—it can be helpful to relay the message through to a third party that may have access to a better signal. The commander decided to relay the unit’s position through to a nearby high observation post that the unit manned.

The commander tried again two or three times without response. Manning the observation post that night was a religious Zionist soldier named Yigal. Yigal was a pious soldier in his midtwenties who could often be seen staying up late into the night on his cot, reading Hasidic tracts. The soldiers on the patrol—who by happenstance were all religious Zionists—seemed to understand what was happening. One could see them sharing annoyed and perhaps awkward glances, as Yigal’s thin soft voice suddenly came over the radio confirming the message and relaying the location into the war room.

When asked later that evening if there was perhaps a problem with the radio in the observation post Yigal quietly responded, “No, I heard everything, I just wasn’t sure if it was really necessary to depress the ‘push-to-talk’ button [electronically activating the radio on his end] and answer. After all no one was really in danger and I thought that you guys might eventually get through to the war room. When I saw that wasn’t going to happen, I answered.” Yigal’s tone of voice and the way he periodically looked down toward his feet made it clear that he felt uncomfortable with the matter.

Here was one of those richly nuanced dilemmas that straddle the worlds of religious experience, ritual precision, and national fidelity. An incident that for some may have been an annoyance, and for others an infraction, for Yigal was a halakhic dilemma. Alone in a dark observation post with no rabbinic authority to call, or ritual tract to consult, Yigal had to determine if the religious prohibition against the use of electricity on the Sabbath superseded the operational necessity of activating the military radio? It should be noted that Yigal’s hesitancy to work the radio, and his willingness—which was starkly

opposed to IDF policy—to interpret “operational activity” on his own was ignored, by all of his immediate superiors, to include the platoon commander who led the patrol. It seemed as if in the interests of unit morale and cohesion, the junior commanding ranks of the unit would accept certain individual nuances of ritual practice that contradicted official policy.

The Case of the Sabbath Lunch

Religious Zionist combat soldiers like Yigal, must frequently make very quick ritual decisions, often in moments of relative isolation. While Yigal was forced to confront his halakhic dilemma alone, others must do so in groups. At the same time, like Yigal, they are no less isolated from formal rabbinic guidance or halakhic written materials.

One Sabbath afternoon in early November, Nehemia and a unit of reserve soldiers were five hours into a twelve-hour shift at a roadblock in the northern West Bank not far from the Palestinian city of Jenin. It was extremely hot that day and lunch was late. Normally, the jeep patrol was supposed to deliver food to the soldiers at the road block. At the time however, the jeep was away on a mission and so at around one in the afternoon the unit’s quartermaster rolled up in his silver Mazda 3 to deliver lunch.

In some circumstances, what might have been a nice or responsible gesture on the part of the quartermaster also posed a serious halakhic dilemma for the religious Zionist soldiers serving at that roadblock. First, driving is not permitted on the Sabbath and one is also forbidden from benefiting from any action that violates the Sabbath. Second, the religious nationalist soldiers present at the roadblock considered the jeep patrol to be a military operational activity, and so, along its route it was permitted to transport food to the various positions. For an individual, however, to use his own car to transport lunch was far more problematic. There were after all some basic foodstuffs—bread, eggs, some salad—at the roadblock. Was the traditional Sabbath stew and breaded baked chicken truly “necessary” for operational activity?

A great many Jewish-legal opinions have been written about this issue, from the more lenient to the very stringent, including opinions authored by the military rabbinate itself (Avidan 1989; Gutel 2006; IDF Rabbinate 2008). At the time, the soldiers at the roadblock had access to none of them. As reservists however, they had all experienced similar dilemmas in the past. A very brief discussion was held. One noted how “we’ll be here for another seven hours at the least, if we don’t accept this food we may not get more.” Another responded, “If the Jeep had brought the food it would be okay, but the quartermaster? We’d be deriving benefit from his violating the sabbath.” This individual was referring to a halakhic debate as to whether one may

indirectly benefit from an action that violated the Sabbath. The legal issues of indirect benefit (by whom, how to define it, was the original violation “accidental” or “intentional”), however, are quite complicated. None of the religious Zionist soldiers at the roadblock that afternoon were conversant enough in Jewish law to make a compelling case, but they did seem to know what ‘felt’ right. “We can’t eat this” one said with finality, “we’ll just have to make do.” It was decided that although there may be a possibility for ritual leniency, the religious soldiers should refrain from eating the delivered food. The first author however was decidedly hungry - and was sorely disappointed by - what he saw as the ill considered - collective decision. At the same time, peer pressure prevailed and no one ate.

This brief discussion was based in military practicality set against religious legal dicta. As Napoleon knew only so well, an army marches on its stomach. How can soldiers function at a roadblock on a hot day without a real lunch? There were, however, more delicate issues at stake as well. The following day Nehemia asked Shai (one of the soldiers present) why they chose to take a more stringent halakhic viewpoint and not rely on any number of possible leniencies. “First of all, I’m not an expert but I’m not really sure there is room for leniency here” Shai responded. “But even if there was, listen . . . we’re at the beginning of our month-long service. Do we really want the quartermaster to think that this is how he can deliver us food on the Sabbath? This isn’t a good precedent. Yesterday the Jeep patrol was busy, next week he [the quartermaster] might just decide it’s easier to deliver the food with his own car.” For Shai, even if leniency was a possibility, eating from the food might set a precedent with the secular quartermaster, where he would think that food could always be delivered through his private vehicle.

This incident demonstrates how halakhic dilemmas are confronted and resolved by national religious soldiers in the social context of a military unit. Here, Jewish law was set against the equally sensitive topic of relations with the more secular soldiers in the unit. At stake here, however, was something more than intra-unit conflicts and unit cohesion. For Shai and the other reservists, military service is a civic as well as a sacred duty. While grappling with the issue of “necessity” on the Sabbath, these soldiers were also—in their own way—negotiating between the sacred and the civic.

The issues at stake in these ritual dilemmas go far beyond the basic Sabbath prohibitions. Combat soldiers like Yigal and the team manning the roadblock desire to cultivate (or retain) a disciplined “religious self.” This desire takes on an existential value, one that vies for space with other desires such as military necessity or simple comradeship. Here the conflict between religious fidelity and the desire to serve within a wider secular polity

manifests itself through specific ritual–legal dilemmas and their attendant resolutions.

Personal Piety

The Case of the Tired Soldier Who Needed to Pray

For these national religious combat soldiers, the everyday hardships of military life act as distinct moments where ritual dilemmas transform into everyday personal trials of piety. Asher, for example, was a medic in a reserve infantry unit. He came from a strictly observant religious nationalist background, and with six children he was normally exempt from routine reserve call-ups. The first author, however, met Asher during an emergency reserve call-up of their unit during the 2014 Gaza Israeli Conflict. During their month-long service, they studied rabbinic texts together and their conversations often turned to broader religious and social issues.

The experience of fatigue was foremost among Asher's concerns. Indeed, beyond the Sabbath and holidays, fatigue was one of the central issues religious Zionist soldiers pointed to when describing the hardships that the military places on the ritual aspects of their service specifically regarding the issue of daily prayers. Religiously observant Jews are required to pray three times a day. The morning prayers are the longest (depending on the day of the week, lasting anywhere between thirty minutes and an hour). There are also various prohibitions pertaining to what one may eat before morning prayers.

In IDF combat units there are usually more operational activities than there is manpower to account for them. Lack of sleep is endemic for most personnel. Asher spoke about the difficulty of rising early for prayer after spending the night guarding or on a patrol. "During my enlisted service, I might guard all night and then I would fight myself to get up and pray, and I would just feel so sick that day. And then if I were to sleep in, I would just feel so guilty." In interviews with other soldiers, some described how they would sometimes pray in their posts although their rabbis told them this was unnecessary as any military operational activity is itself a ritual commandment. On the other hand, Ilan, for example, a tankist who had studied in a Hesder seminary, would make sure to pray every morning despite how tired he was. As he put it "not every prayer was the most powerful, but every morning I prayed, that was where I drew the line, that was important."

For his part, as Asher matured, he realized that sleep is an equal part of one's operational military duty. "If you can't sleep, you can't operate," he explained, "It's a mitzva [a ritual obligation] to sleep." It was not necessarily the act of sleeping that was so stressful for Asher. What was at stake was

not just the morning prayers but rather a sense that the military would slowly grind down his finely tuned religious sensibilities. As he noted, “If you don’t pray for one day, two days, or a week, it starts to affect you. But I’m a soldier, and when I’m in uniform I want to be the best soldier possible, and so if I have to skip prayers in order to sleep so that I can function, then that itself might be a ritual obligation.” For Asher, the halakhic dilemmas brought about by the quotidian experience of fatigue highlighted his dual desires to retain a religious lifestyle set against his need to serve faithfully as a combat soldier in the IDF. As the first author shared a barrack with Asher, he would often see him “sleeping in,” in the morning, and was careful not to wake him.

The Case of the Unobserved Fast-Day

For some, however, the desire to experience piety while serving in the IDF supersedes the military’s own framework for addressing ritual concerns. The first author’s reserve battalion was called up to serve in the 2014 Gazan conflict—known in Israel as Operation Protective Edge—a day before the Jewish day of mourning known as Tisha B’Av. On that day, observant Jews refrain from eating or drinking for twenty-five hours to commemorate the destruction of the two temples, as well as the broader historical experience of Jewish suffering. This is a particularly difficult fast-day owing to its length and being that it comes at the height of the Israeli summer (July–August). The unit’s main day of training before spending the rest of the war operating in the suburbs of the Palestinian city of Nablus in the Northern West Bank was to be held on the day of Tisha B’Av itself.

Under normal circumstances, religious soldiers would be given medical leave to observe the fast day. The battalion however had not trained together for over a year, and everyone was called upon to participate in the day’s arduous events. On this occasion, the deputy battalion commander asked Rabbi Eyal Krim for permission to train the unit. As a respected combat infantry officer in his own right, Rabbi Krim represents what Cohen, Kampinsky, and Rosman-Stollman (2016, 74) see as a new breed of military rabbi whose legal rulings draw on “lessons personally imbibed from [their own] combat service.” Rabbi Krim, who was a civilian at the time (though as of April 2018 serves as the IDF’s Chief Rabbi), ruled that it was necessary to eat and drink throughout the day as if it were not Tisha B’Av.

Every reserve battalion has its own military rabbi who also serves in the reserves and who is inducted for the same period of time. The battalion rabbi is in theory responsible for providing the halakhic opinions on these kinds of issues. Once again, theory does not often mirror reality. That the

question itself was referred to a civilian rabbi with a great deal of experience in military matters, and not directly to the battalion rabbi demonstrates the limited influence that the military rabbinate has on the practical everyday workings of the military. As the battalion rabbi noted in a later interview, “Of course I was supposed to offer that halakhic opinion. I was a little offended, but I’m just a young rabbi in the reserves, I don’t really have that kind of authority.”

Despite Rabbi Krim’s esteemed combat record, and the respect he holds in the military, not all the soldiers in the battalion accepted his ruling. Similar to questions related to the necessity of operational activity on the Sabbath, individual soldiers are ultimately responsible for deciding to what extent eating and drinking were “necessary” on the fast day. In this way, individual soldiers each balanced military values with their ritual principles in different and sometimes contradictory ways. The first author—who followed the opinion of Rabbi Krim and ate as if it were a regular day—observed a wide range eating practice. Some refrained from solid food and just drank water throughout the day, while others chose to refrain from all food for only the first half of the day, still others chose to refrain from eating meat products in accordance with the halakhic rules of mourning applicable to the days preceding Tisha B’Av. One soldier, however, fasted the entire day through a difficult training regimen. At the end of the day when asked why he would do such a (seemingly dangerous) thing, he simply shrugged and said, “I’m feeling fine. I’m generally a good faster and I just wanted to see if I could do it.” In this instance, the ritual question of whether to fast or not was intimately interlaced with a complex tapestry of concerns that include military virtue, asceticism, stamina, strength, and perhaps even masculinity in ways that overlook both the official channels of the military rabbinate and the semiofficial opinion of Rabbi Krim.

Conclusion

This article has explored how national religious combat soldiers grapple with the many prosaic rabbinic and ritual dilemmas that arise during their service. For these soldiers, rabbinic dilemmas serve as the medium through which they experience some of the broader tensions generated by their religious nationalist convictions within the wider Israeli society. In this way, the ritual dilemmas of Jewish political pietists in Israel also function as social dilemmas that index many of the larger cultural and political tensions that can be found both in the military and in Israeli society. An ethnographic sensitivity to the ways in which the social experience of rabbinic law functions in military spaces provides anthropologists with a unique window into the inner

lives and dimensions of a growing population of individuals at the heart of Israel's security apparatus.

Academics and lay observers both tend to view religious practices and experiences as acting upon the body politic in ways that cultivate what Charles Hirschkind describes, in his study of Islamic taped sermons in Egypt, as “modes of public sociability” (Hirschkind 2001, 4). In some instances, these modes are seen as working to politically radicalize religious practitioners. In this way, many anthropologists and political scientists have viewed the increased role that national religious soldiers play in the IDF's many combat regiments as a threat to the secular nature of the State of Israel in general and the egalitarian values of the military in particular (Yefet 2016; Levy 2010, 2011; Røislien 2013; Bick 2007). In other instances, modes of religious discourse—such as premilitary rabbinic academies—are seen as moderating the impact of religious expressions on public discourse (Rosman-Stollman 2008 and 2014).

An ethnographic analysis of the ritual experiences of these soldiers themselves however begs us to reexamine how religious practices operate within social and political spheres. For national religious combat soldiers in the IDF, religious practices function less as an external force that “seeks to preserve [certain] virtues, ethical capacities, and forms of reasoning” (Mahmood 2003, 840) but rather as a somewhat ambivalent means through which they come to navigate the murky waters of national obligations and personal piety. Specifically, the dilemmas surrounding their ritual practices serve as a basic medium through which they come to grapple with wider issues of civic obligations, tolerance, and personal piety.

The contradictions that emerge between military service and personal piety—along with the existential threats one poses to the other—are reflected in the imperfect resolutions to these ritual dilemmas. The ideological and social aspirations of political pietists in Israel, the West Bank, and perhaps across the wider Middle East are intimately rooted in the imperfect ways in which individuals grapple with the dilemmas and ambiguities that are generated by the confluence of politics with piety.

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Notes

1. We prefer to employ the phrase “religiously observant” rather than “orthodox” since the latter implies a specific doctrinal and denominational affiliation that may not apply to an Israeli context.
2. The IDF itself does not keep official records related to the religious observance of its personnel.
3. Ilan was in his midtwenties at the time of interview.
4. Tzvi was in his midthirties at the time of interview.
5. The situation is somewhat different for officers who have more direct and regular contact with female soldiers.

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