"Shall your brethren go to the war, and shall you sit here?" Thoughts for Matot-Masei, July 21, 2012

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One of the burning issues in contemporary Israeli political/religious life relates to widespread exemptions from military service granted to Hareidim ("ultra" Orthodox Jews). The Hareidi leadership insists that all men who study Torah in their yeshivot are thereby serving the nation, and must not be asked to do anything more. While other young Israeli men and women are required to serve in the military or national social services, Hareidi young men and women have generally been allowed to be exempted by dint of their religious commitments.

It must be pointed out that many religious Israelis serve conscientiously and valiantly in the Israel Defense Forces. Indeed, religious Zionists have proven to be among Israel's most dedicated and most effective soldiers, officers and community workers.

The dilemma in Israel relates specifically to the Hareidi community. The increasing hostility toward the Hareidim is palpable among the wide spectrum of Israeli society including many in the religious Zionist camp. Why, they ask, should their sons and daughters sacrifice so much for the nation while the Hareidi sons and daughters are asked to sacrifice nothing? Why should Israeli society/government provide so much financial support and welfare to a community that refuses to share in the responsibility of defending the nation? Echoing Moses' question to the tribes of Gad and Reuven, which we read in this week's Torah portion: "Shall your brethren go to the war, and shall you sit here?" (Bemidbar 32:6)

The Hareidim reply: we serve the nation by studying Torah! We are the spiritual soldiers of Israel without whom the nation of Israel cannot survive.

Surely, the study of Torah is meritorious. It can be legitimately argued that gifted young men who wish to devote themselves to high level Torah study should be granted this opportunity, as long as they recognize their responsibility to the total

Israeli society—not just to their Hareidi enclaves. The problem arises, though, in that the Hareidi leadership demands exemptions for all their many thousands of students, not just for the elite few very promising students.

The public stance of Hareidi leadership has been uncompromising and strident. One Hareidi rabbinic leader was quoted in the Israeli press as having stated that if the Israel Defense Forces were to draft 50,000 Hareidim, they will need to prepare 50,000 prison cells—since not one of the Hareidim will agree to serve!

How different is this approach from the normative religious view expressed by Moses himself. In this week's Torah portion, Moses made it clear to the tribes of Gad and Reuven—and to the Israelites in general—that all are obligated to fight for the nation. Any tribe which shirks responsibility is thereby undermining the strength and the morale of the entire people.

When Israel's War of Independence broke out in 1948, a group of yeshiva students came to the office of Rabbi Benzion Uziel, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. They asked Rabbi Uziel to write letters exempting them from military service. Rabbi Uziel expressed his unequivocal displeasure with these students. He told them that it was their religious duty to fight in defense of Israel. When the nation comes under attack, even brides and grooms must hasten from the wedding canopy in order to defend the people of Israel. Not only is there a religious obligation to fight in defense of the nation, but yeshiva students who claim exemptions inevitably bring disgrace to the religious community and to the Torah.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, a devoted disciple of Rabbi Uziel, demonstrated by personal example that Torah students and scholars were an integral part of the nation's defense. During the War of Independence in 1948, he served in an army unit comprised of yeshiva students and graduates. This military experience did not detract from his Torah scholarship—he went on to become one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of his generation!

The State of Israel is seeking ways to include many more of the Hareidim in the Israel Defense Forces and in the related National Service programs. There is much political in-fighting and negotiating among the various parties. It is clear, though, that the overwhelming majority of Israelis are fed up with the status quo that offers sweeping exemptions and benefits to Hareidim.

Religious leadership should not be resisting the impending changes, but should be at the vanguard of suggesting ways in which all Israelis can share in the

responsibilities and privileges of serving in defense of the nation. In the long run, this is not only better for the State of Israel; it is better for the Hareidi community itself—and is better for the status of religion and Torah in the Jewish State.

It is well past time to reclaim the religious vision of such sages as Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Halevy.

Angel for Shabbat